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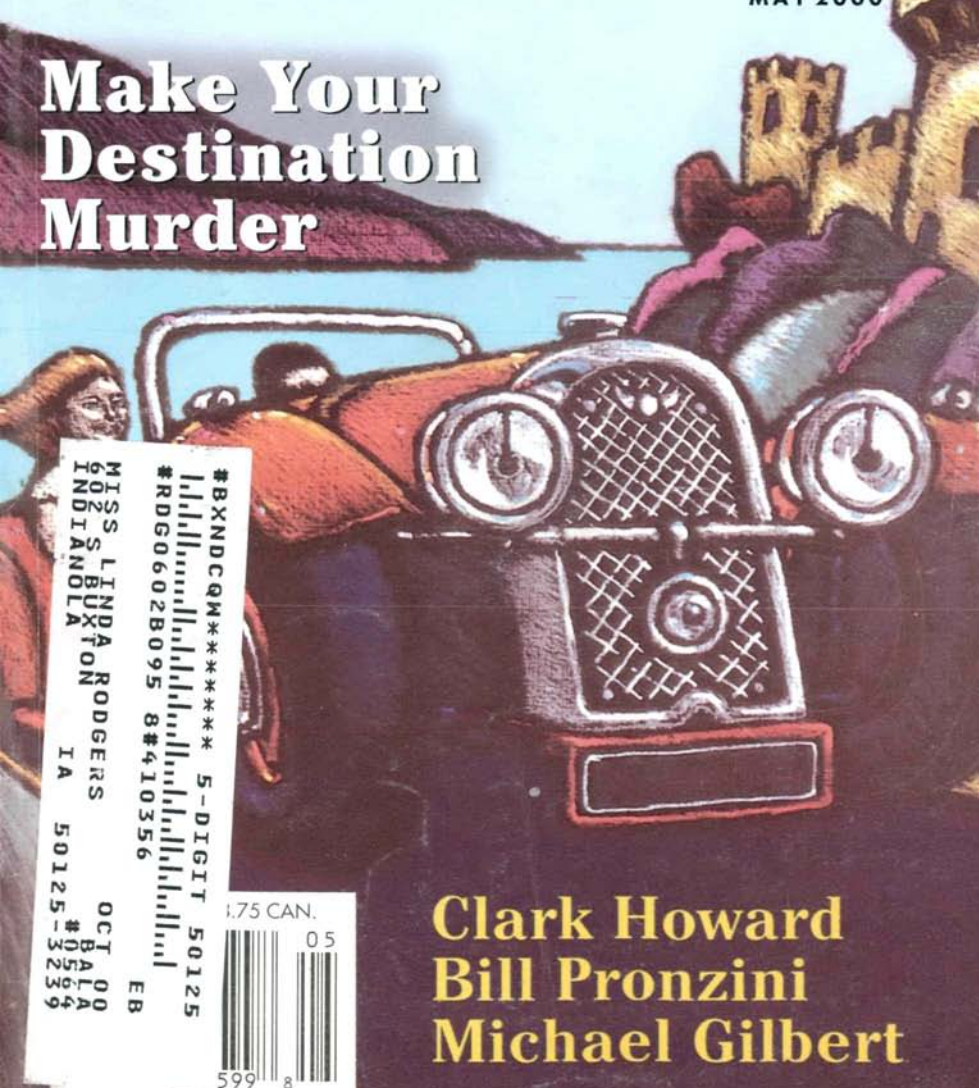

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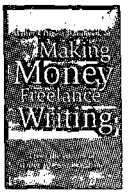

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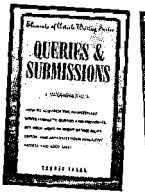

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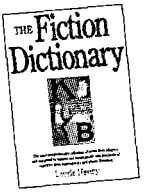

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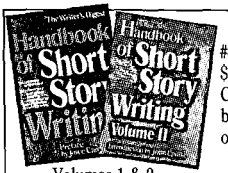

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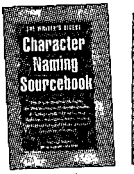

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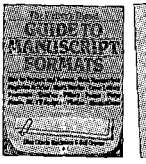

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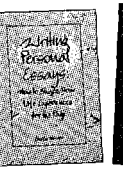

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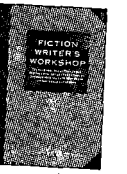

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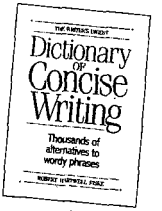

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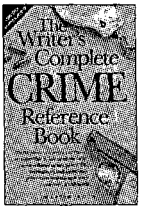

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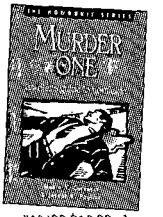

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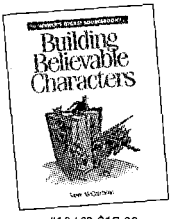

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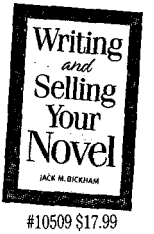

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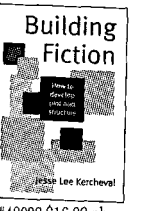

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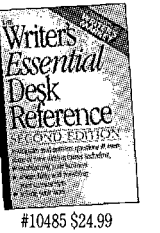

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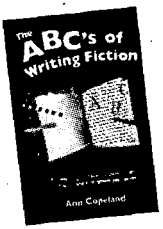

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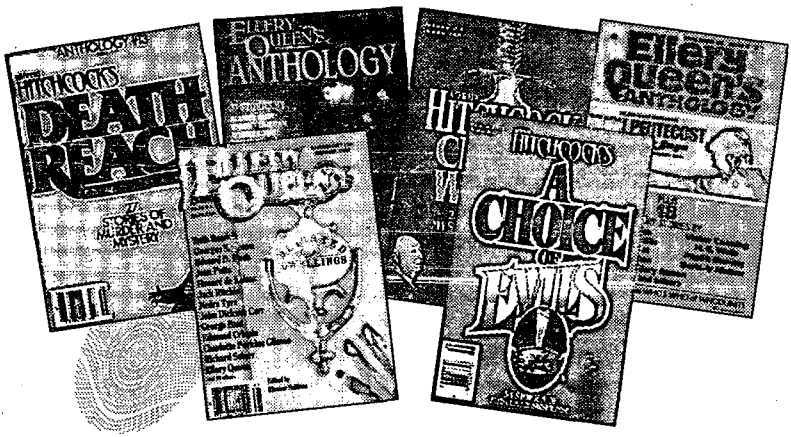

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GIRL TALK

by Marilyn Todd

1.

Sometimes, when Destiny calls, it's best to pretend to be out.

This was, after all, the Circus Maximus—and amid pulsating excitement and a frantic rush for seats, what was one more silly rumour? Ignore it, Claudia told herself. Rumours are like fires, they fizzle out unless you poke and prod them.

But instead of moving on down the steps and bagging a seat near the racetrack, Claudia Seferius found herself edging that little bit closer . . .

Two minutes later, she'd cleaved a path through the surge of humanity and was elbowing her way out the turreted entrance which, despite midmorning, lay deep in shade from the Palatine Hill.

"Alms?" A grubby hand with bitten-down nails thrust a container towards her and rattled it. "Alms for a one-legged warrior?"

"Unless you wish to wear your nose on the back of your lice-ridden head, I suggest you move out of my way."

Skewered by her glare, the beggar, whose sole brush with the

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army had been to doss in the lee of the barracks, forgot his sham disabilities and hopped smartly aside, and when he looked in his bowl, he could have sworn he was two asses down. Bugger! He'd planned to buy a pie off the vendor with that!

Claudia bit deep into the hot crumbly pastry as she marched beneath the steep escarpment. How dare he! How bloody dare Hector Polemo spread vicious gossip, insinuating she watered down the wine she sold! Claudia glowered at the flagstones, which sped beneath her feet. That's where he belongs, Polemo. In the sewer which runs below these wretched cobbles! And that, by all the gods, is where I'll have him crawling.

"Girl Talk" by Marilyn Todd is part of the Claudia Seferius series of ancient Roman murder mysteries, and is the first of Claudia's adventures to appear in short-story form. So far, four novels featuring Seferius are in print in England: *I, Claudia; Virgin Territory; Man Eater,* and *Wolf Whistle.* The author of these lively and amusing tales resides in West Sussex, England.

The street being narrow, she ducked into the spice-seller's to avoid a braying donkey, its panniers bursting with melons, dates, and pomegranates, and took the opportunity to sneak a pinch of pepper on her pie. Holy Jupiter, wasn't she having enough trouble keeping the business afloat without some reptile spreading lies? I mean, it's all fine and dandy, people calling you lucky just because that ageing lardball you married popped his clogs years before expected; what do they know? Rich, wasn't he, the old wine merchant? Huh! It was only *after* the funeral feast had been cleared away that Claudia discovered her luscious inheritance was tied up in stock and trusts and property—and you just try spending an apartment block in Naples or half a brickworks on the Via Tiburtina!

Claudia tossed the last corner of her pie to the hopeful mongrel who'd been pattering behind and brushed her hands together. Offers to buy the business had come flooding in, including one from Polemo so tempting that Claudia had almost drawn up the contract. Until, that is, she discovered profit margins on wine were virtually double that of any other business! Goddamnit, she'd be a fool to cash that in. Why not take a chance and break out on her own?

The street veered left, a bustle of shops and shoppers concerned exclusively with luxuries—perfumes, emeralds, books of vellum, tunics woven with wool spun as fine as babies' hair.

Why not? Because the Guild refused to deal with women, that's

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why not. Unheard of, don't y'know. A woman's place was in the bedroom, ha-ha-ha, and the proposals, which had at first been oh-so-fair, became hard-nosed ultimatums, until finally they petered out—and it was at this point Polemo revealed himself to be a pirate in commercial waters.

"Take what you want by whatever means you can, that's my motto," he had laughed in that distinctive boom of his. "Sooner or later you'll have to sell and when you do, my pretty widow, I'll be the one who's mopping up the spills."

He'd had the gall to approach her during the very parade in which her husband, had he lived, would have been at the fore, Polemo, and that stuck-up bitch he married—what was her name? Selina, that's right. Selina, with her predatory green eyes and flawless skin.

"My family's produced wine for generations," he said, unmoved by shining breastplates and caparisoned white horses. "When we set out to expand, we expand, and nobody—I mean nobody—stands in our way." He smiled a lizard smile to emphasise his point. "So why don't you reflect on that?"

Auburn-haired Selina was standing at his shoulder.

"I don't need to," Claudia had replied, keeping her gaze fixed on the swords held aloft by purple-robed riders. "Your threats don't frighten me, Polemo, and my response remains a raspberry."

Selina slipped in front of her husband, and Claudia had been able to smell her expensive perfume above the acid tang of horseflesh and leather and dung. "You'd be wise not to cross us," she purred. "Hector always gets his way in the end."

For the first time, Claudia wrenched her eyes away from the dazzling display of weaponry and armour. "Not only am I immune to bullying," she replied, "I won't be *cowed* either!"

Selina's breath came out in a hiss, but Hector's restraining hand on her shoulder had cut short retaliation. Well, that little interchange had taken place exactly one month ago today, and clearly Polemo wasn't a man to let the grass grow beneath his finely tooled sandals. Already the rumour-mongers were putting it about that Claudia Seferius watered her wine—what a cheek! The thought never entered her head! Not while she was palming it off as eight-year-old vintage . . .

On the corner by the basilica, a score of male prostitutes draped themselves against the columns and the walls, kohl-eyed and preening, but Claudia paid scant attention as she swept into a Forum ablaze with late summer sunshine and seething with advocates and acrobats, charlatans and hucksters, with slaves pushing handcarts and porters balancing amphorae of sweet olive oil. Pungent aromas exploded all around. Sausages sizzling on a spit, incense from the temples, fragrant roots from the herbalist.

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"The sun's high in Libra," an astrologer said. "Would the lady like me to draw up her horoscope?"

His scrolls scattered across the travertine flags as the whirlwind blazed on, half-expecting to see Polemo striding towards her any minute, mastiff at his side, lackeys at his heels, brushing his hand through the air as he waved interruptions and issues aside. By the gods, Claudia fumed, I'll choke you with your chitterlings for this! Influential he might be, but Hector Polemo wasn't above being knocked off his perch and exposed for the worm he truly was.

Handsome enough, though, she conceded. Knocking forty with a thatch of hair envied by many half his age and, to be honest, they made a handsome couple, him and his foxy-faced wife. There was a teenage daughter, too. Lotis, wasn't it? Though rumour had it, raising children was a job for nannies and for nursemaids as far as those two were concerned.

The house lay just off the Via Sacra. A respectable house, in a respectable neighbourhood, with a respectable white cat washing on the window ledge until the clatter on the knocker sent it diving under the laurels.

"Where are they?" With the flat of her hand, Claudia barged the doorman aside. "That slimeball Polemo and his poisonous wife. Where are they?"

"Who . . . ?" The elderly doorman strove to keep up as Claudia flounced through the vestibule and into the bright, airy atrium. "Who . . . ?"

"What are you?" she asked, throwing up her hands. "An owl?"

"I believe," a deep voice intercepted from the corner, "the doorman is enquiring after your own name."

I don't believe this! Holy Jupiter, Destiny must be doubled up with laughter!

Ignoring the baritone, Claudia instructed the doorman to fetch that lowlife weasel Hector and be bloody quick about it. His rheumy eyes darted to the corner and back again, but the doorman didn't move.

"The lowlife weasel's out." The baritone made no attempt to eliminate the amusement from its vocal chords. "Or so everyone surmises. He's not been seen since last night."

Down in the Circus Maximus, grim-faced competitors would be racing each other on thickly greased hides, much to the delight of the crowd, while here, finches in an aviary chirrupped and sang as though this was the happiest day of their lives. Shit! Claudia ground her heel into the nose of a mosaic dolphin and was damned if she'd turn around.

"In that case," Claudia's eyes bored so hard into the old door-

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man's, his began to water, "you can wheel out the frosty-faced old haddock that he married."

Wouldn't you just know the poor doorman would be pipped to the answering post!

"Selina," the baritone pronounced, "is still in bed."

The fountain in the pool juggled droplets of water in sunshine which turned bronze ancestral busts to gold.

"Orbilio," Claudia said wearily, "why do you persist in bugging me?"

She really did not need this. Not here. Not some ferreting investigator snooping around to rattle the bones in her closet. And sod's law meant it was Marcus Cornelius Orbilio she had to bump into! The only man in Rome who knew the dark side of her past! Not, of course, that it was her past which was the problem at the moment. For reasons best known to themselves, the Security Police are attracted to offences which result in things like exile. And when it came to sniffing out crime, Orbilio had the snout of a trufflehound.

"Me?" The wool of his toga squeaked as he slid off the polished table he'd perched against, and Claudia caught a faint whiff of his sandalwood unguent. "I was under the impression it was the other way around."

Claudia heard a grinding sound and, in the absence of any quernstones in the atrium, concluded it was the gnashing of her teeth.

"After all," he continued mildly, "I got here first, remember?"

Crossing her arms, Claudia stared at the sky through the opening in the roof and wished something would happen up there to break the blue monotony. Nothing did, of course. No honking geese, no passing butterfly, not even one tiny puff of cloud. Though for a busy household, it seemed odd that she could hear only the thumping of her heart against her ribcage.

"Perhaps," he suggested, and she could feel the twinkle in his eyes boring deep into her shoulderblades, "you would care to join the treasure hunt?"

He came into view then, casting his tall, broad shadow over the pool. For half a second Claudia allowed herself the hope that maybe, just maybe, he was here on a social visit, patrician to patrician and all that . . . ?

"Are we," she enquired, "talking cryptic clues on scraps of parchment?"

"N-not exactly." Bugger. "The hunt is for one Justus Capella."

"Oh, and what might the Security Police be fitting this poor sod up with?"

Dark eyes crinkled at the corners. "Strange as it may seem," he said, "we have a preference for villains." He leaned his weight

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against a marble podium, and Claudia watched a pulse beat in his neck. "Prosecutions tend to stick more easily, although in Capella's case we'll have no problem. His attempt to kill the emperor was quite blatant."

Assassination! Curious despite herself, Claudia trawled her memory. Capella. Capella. She knew that name, surely? Ah, yes. The half-baked revolutionary! Like father, like son, so they said, and whilst his father might have died fighting at Mark Antony's side, Justus had retained his father's papers, met with his father's friends, and still found time to whip up sympathisers of his own.

All very noble, Claudia supposed, all very idealistic—had it not been for the fact that the Antony rebellion had been quashed twenty years ago!

Mind, she'd seen Justus in action on the Rostrum, and not only were his tones persuasive, he was a head-turner, too. Small wonder most of his devotees were women, but then women always did go for dimples in the chin. Makes even brutes seem somehow vulnerable.

"Let me get this straight," she said, running her fingers lightly back and forth across the aviary. "Justus Capella takes a pop at the emperor and you come here to arrest him on your own. My hero."

"More hack than hero," Orbilio said wistfully. "Capella's disappeared, and while the army gets the glory, searching every crevice and shaking down every cart, your champion is reduced to tramping round the city, questioning the man's associates."

"Or not questioning them, as the case may be," Claudia corrected cheerfully.

"Did I say it was easy being a hero?"

His fingers closed round the bars of the birdcage; she could see the short dark hairs on the back of his hand, smelled the rosemary in which his tunic had been rinsed. . . . She forced her mind back to business.

"Is Hector involved in the assassination plot?" Two birds with one stone and all that!

"Who knows? Capella called yesterday and there was one humdinger of a row between Hector and his wife, though the slaves couldn't hear what it was about. Unfortunately, since Selina has left explicit orders not to be disturbed—" the fingers released the wooden bars and spiked their way through his curls "—I'm forced to wait for Lotis to return, in the hope she can shed light on the whereabouts of either her father or, better still, Capella. Patience—" He released a weary grin and Claudia's heart seemed to bump that little bit harder. (Proximity of the law, of course. What else?) "—is but one of my many virtues."

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"Patience," she said, marching towards the bed chambers, "is a damned good waste of drinking time."

As her footsteps echoed down the corridor, Claudia was again struck by the opulence of Hector's house—Parian marbles, painted frescoes, gilded stucco ceilings—and her resolve hardened. Polemo might be an aristocrat whose family tree had its roots intertwined with the vine, but the moral was clear. Stick at it, girl, and you too will be rolling!

"Upsy-dupsy, Selina," she trilled, flinging wide the bedroom door. "It's time we girls had a little chat."

Claudia had not taken three paces before she pulled up sharp, clamping her hand over her mouth. Selina was indeed still in bed. Her lush auburn hair streamed across the damask pillow, her emerald eyes wide and lovely, even in death.

And make no mistake, Selina was dead. Her head had been neatly detached from her body.

That, though, wasn't why Claudia reeled out of the room. She'd seen enough blood spilled in the arena not to be squeamish. No, it was more the fact that the body upon which the head had been placed did not belong to Selina.

The torso belonged to a man.

2.

Marcus Cornelius Orbilio stared at the bed for several minutes without so much as blinking. Through his current work and during his stint as a tribune in the army, he'd seen death in all its guises and it rarely ever fazed him. He'd seen men writhing on the battlefield, whores stabbed in alleyways, vagrants with their throats cut, and whilst he'd been saddened by it, in turns angered and debased, one thing Orbilio never underestimated was man's capacity to savage his fellow human being.

Thus, anyone watching now, as the sun dazzled the eyes of a mosaic lion, would have been surprised to see him standing motionless, his face set solid, apparently in shock at the grotesque arrangement on the couch.

Orbilio would have been flattered, since his introspection was considerably baser than concern for Selina or Polemo, or even tracking zealous revolutionaries. All that mattered, as far as he could see, was that fate had catapulted Claudia Seferius—the woman who broke laws the way a trainer breaks horses—back into his orbit . . . and this time she would not slip through his grasp!

And slip she would, given half a chance; she had more tricks up her sleeve than Circe, the enchantress who had bewitched Odysseus on his return from the Trojan War. Take this morning, for example. What magic inspired such passion, such lust inside

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him that, even when she stumbled into the atrium, wheyfaced and shaking and any fool could sense something was seriously amiss, his sole impulse had been to take her on the spot, there and then! Orbilio closed his eyes and inhaled the memory of her spicy, Judean perfume. Mother of Tarquin, how he yearned to watch the pale blue cotton of her tunic slither to her ankles, to loosen her breast band and feel the—

"So."

Her voice in his ear sent colour rushing to his cheeks. She could read minds now? He wouldn't put it past her!

"Double suicide?"

"Undoubtedly," he grinned back, and felt something lurch in his gut when he looked at her. "What else could it be?"

Then he glanced down at the body/bodies and the storm inside him subsided. At last he understood why they called it the Security Police, because that's how his emotions were, now his brain was centred again. Secure and in control. Oh yes, a chap knows where he is with a maniac running wild. . . . He heard the door click as she closed it behind her.

"I gather," she said, "from the routine hum of housework, that this is still our little secret?"

Secrets, Claudia? With you? The prospect brought a tightness to his chest, but he forced himself to focus on her words. Strange how the instant he'd read the horror in her eyes, he'd dismissed the old doorman. Pure instinct, but that self-same instinct had been quickly vindicated, because the last thing he needed was a houseful of panic-stricken slaves screaming their heads off and trampling any evidence the murderer may have left in his wake.

"They were killed elsewhere," he said needlessly. She knew as well as he there was barely one drop of blood on the sheets. "And positioned here later."

But why?

"Do we have a madman on the loose?" Claudia turned to examine an onyx flask as Orbilio pressed the back of his fingers against Selina's alabaster-white skin.

"Not in the sense you mean, no."

The sun reflected ripples from the washbasin in lines against the wall, and he noticed her gaze was fixed on these as he drew down the shutters on Selina's emerald eyes.

"I don't, for instance, envisage a killer on the rampage, mismatching wives to husbands." He heaved Hector's body onto its front. No marks. He rolled the body back again—it seemed proper, somehow, to align it with the head. "On the other hand, however many enemies they made, these two—" he shot Claudia a sharp glance "—this doesn't seem the work of a sane and balanced mind."

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Orbilio straightened up and wiped his hands on the counterpane.

In fact, unless he missed his guess, Selina's body and Hector's head would be lying next-door in Hector's bedroom.

3.

Life is rarely as we plan it, otherwise we'd all be millionaires with perfect figures, perfect marriages, and a deep all-over tan. Clicking her fingers, Claudia marched up and down the atrium. By rights she ought to be ensconced in her seat at the Capitoline Games, cheering the competitors and making furtive bets as she nibbled honeycombs and winecakes. Ought, though, was the operative word! Supersnoop had spoken and she was grounded, stuck not with wrestlers and racers, but with a couple butchered in their beds. Destiny must have a stitch in her side!

"Sorry," Orbilio had said, looking as contrite as a puppy with a slipper. "I need you as a material witness."

Material witness be buggered, he was on to her! Claudia slapped her palm against her forehead. What an idiot she'd been! The instant she found him here, in Polemo's townhouse, she should have spun on her heel and to hell with rumours about diluting wine!

She plumped down in a chair and stuffed a cushion into the small of her back. What was that word, when you pass one thing off as another? A five-letter word, was it not? Starting with F, ending with D, and didn't it have an R and an A and a U in between . . . ?

She bounced out of the chair and resumed her pacing. *Think you're clever, do you, Marcus Trufflehound Orbilio? Think that by keeping me hanging round the murder scene I might let something slip and you can lure me into a confession? You can forget those slug-slime tactics. Find yourself another mug!*

Claudia pulled up short at the family shrine. Hang on. There might just be a way out of this . . .

Orbilio was in Hector's bedroom and the furrows in his brow could have been left by a ploughshare, they were that deep. But there was disappointment, as well as perplexity, etched on his face.

The room was a mess. A bloody mess, in fact, with the counterpane strewn across the floor, the rug crumpled in a corner, feathers bursting out the bolster. Unfortunately for Hotshot's investigative prowess, it was a room in which someone had lost their temper rather than committed double murder. Not a cadaver in sight, leaving Claudia torn between relief and reservation.

Relief, because she didn't have to confront the grisly spectacle he had predicted.

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Reservation, because without the bodies she was stuck with this cocky patrician who might, if the gods sided with him, solve three cases in as many hours—and if nailing an assassin, exposing a murderer, and catching a fraudster didn't hasten his path to the Senate, what would?

Claudia's objective was to persuade the gods to settle for two out of three.

An overturned lampstand had left pools of olive oil, and Orbilio trod carefully as he searched the rare wood caskets and probed the heavy clothes chests. In contrast to Selina's taste for greens and gold, Hector had chosen earthy colours for his room. Wars were fought on walls and floor, visceral and vivid. Horses reared, shields rolled, javelins rained from the sky, and Claudia decided that if murder hadn't actually been committed here, it damned well should have! The room *was* Hector. Brutal, domineering, riding roughshod to achieve his own ends, and it was hardly surprising he'd met with such a violent end.

"As I thought!" Orbilio waved rolls of parchment in triumph. "Confirmation that Polemo was financing Capella's operation!"

Claudia chewed her lower lip. "You think this is an execution?"

"Quite possibly," he said, leafing through the sheaves of paper. "Augustus has followers so devoted, so fanatical, they would kill without conscience to protect the emerging concept of Empire, the same way Justus would kill to have it revert."

True. Thirty years might have passed since the Roman world had been wrenched in two, Augustus taking control of the west, Mark Antony running the east, but old wounds still festered and grievances passed down. Even now, philosophers debated the case around the Rostrum.

Mark Antony, the neutrals argued, was no less a patriot, but had he been wise to ally himself with the Egyptian whore, Cleopatra? She who'd already tried—and failed—to ensnare Julius Caesar?

Some said yes, definitely. Antony (unlike others they could mention), would not have stopped at the Danube but pressed on to annex Germany and the Belgica tribes, perhaps even Britannica, and by making Alexandria his capital, almost certainly Arabia and the Orient would be ours.

Bollocks, others scoffed. For ten years Antony had ample chance to change things. Instead, he waged continued civil war, he'd never have given us half what the emperor has. Look around! We have peace and prosperity, food in our bellies, gold in our temples—and moreover, our sons don't lie dead on the battlefield.

Oh yes, thought Claudia. To retain such stability, men would kill gladly—but did Hector pose such a threat? A few sesterces

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thrown to Capella's cause was probably more of an insurance policy, should the political scene change in the future.

"Wouldn't the executioners want to leave a clear message?" she asked. "A warning to others sympathetic to rebellious causes?"

"This isn't clear?"

Hmm. Since Supersnoop had already checked the bedrooms for bodies, it was with curiosity as opposed to trepidation that Claudia left him to his scrutiny and slipped into Lotis's chamber. Usually a 15-year-old surrounds herself with clutter bridging infancy and womanhood—the latest robes, pots of perfume, new cosmetics alongside her cracked miniature tea set and a ragged knitted doll. Because by now she'd be affianced, there should be tokens from her future husband, too—a fan, perhaps a parrot. This could pass for a guest room, it was so bare!

A stone dropped in Claudia's stomach and suddenly she felt considerably less sympathy for Hector and Selina, dedicating themselves to the pursuit of pleasure and ambition with not a thought to little Lotis. Fumbling in vain for a ragdoll tucked inside the bedclothes, her vision clouded as she pictured a small child with a light in her eyes and a laugh in her voice rushing up to show Mummy her new tambourine, her gown, her brand new whistle, only to be coldly turned away. Little Lotis would not have sat on Daddy's knee, pulling at his ears, or have him rolling on the floor as they played knucklebones together—and the tragedy was, Lotis would have known what she was missing. Growing up in a house full of slave children, chortling and happy as they bounced balls off cellar walls and played piggy-in-the-middle, her isolation would have been complete.

With a lump in her throat, Claudia left the dismal void of Lotis's bedchamber and passed into the peristyle. Orbilio was browsing through the ledgers in Hector's office, and without him noticing her, she approached the bathroom door.

"Sorry, ma'am, the mistress says you can't go in." A dumpy kitchen maid scurrying past with a brace of duck and a skillet tucked under her arm paused to admonish the visitor.

The visitor saw no point in mentioning the mistress was in no position to countermand the order. "Why's that?" she asked.

The girl giggled before remembering herself. "Well, she likes her privacy, does Miss Selina."

Claudia considered the implications. Selina had been dead some hours, probably since last night . . .

"When did Miss Selina give this order?" she enquired.

"Ooh." The wench thought back. "Yesterday afternoon, it would have been, when—" She stopped short, her cheeks aflame, and by somehow indicating that the duck were so urgently required by

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the cook that to delay might cause reverberations right across the Empire, she scampered out of sight.

Claudia opened the door to the bathroom and peered in. "Hey, Trufflehound," she called out. "There's something here which might interest you."

4.

Marcus Cornelius Orbilio heard, rather than observed, Claudia pass behind the office, and he was intrigued. When he'd informed her she was required to stay as a material witness, he'd been prepared for a battle—and found instead compliance!

He bit his lip. She was up to something, he could smell it. Ask her to hang around a murder scene when the dead are virtual strangers and the Capitoline Games are in full swing and you don't expect her to shout "yippee." At best, he'd have envisaged her sprawled across a couch, one long leg swinging with an air of nonchalance as she maybe read a spot of Virgil or nibbled chestnut bread, but never in his wildest dreams (correction, nightmares) did he imagine her assisting his investigations on a voluntary basis.

She was digging a pit for him to fall into.

All he had to do was to spot it—

Vaguely uneasy, but unable to say why, Marcus was checking Polemo's accounts when he heard Claudia call out. The grim set of her face said it all, and through the open doorway his eyes scanned the sunken floor and frescoes of winged cupids. Blast! While he'd been chasing rabbits, she'd stumbled on the bodies. . . .

He ran along the peristyle and skidded to a halt inside the doorway. There were no windows to the room. Illumination came from two bronze lampstands, each supporting six small hanging lanterns—ample light to reveal the painted waterfall under which two painted nymphs cavorted with a painted satyr and the cleaver propped against the rocks. Except the cleaver wasn't art. Blue steel glittered in the lamplight, flickering and wicked, its handle in a pool of dark brown sludge.

Orbilio swore under his breath. Bloodstains by the bucketload where the bodies had been chopped up—but no trace of the remains! Where the *hell* could they be? A prolonged and penetrating scream cut short his musings. Damn! He sprinted back along the corridor. He'd given explicit orders to keep clear of Selina's room—

Oh, shit. Orbilio passed his hand over his eyes and experienced a wave of nauseous shame. In his efforts to link Polemo with the plot against the emperor, he'd completely overlooked the fact that he'd originally been waiting for the daughter, Lotis.

Who'd now returned—and paid a call upon her mother!

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5.

Morning turned to afternoon to evening, and the smell of scapegoat hung rank in the air.

Between them, the slaves travelled every single gamut of emotion, and as the shadows lengthened and the air cooled down, they retreated into silent huddles, terrified and stiff. Unless the killer was unmasked, and quickly, the entire contingent faced execution on the grounds that the murderer must, by default, be one amongst them.

Not all the gods they prayed to were Roman.

Not all the gods they prayed to were listening.

Undertakers came and went, military boots left mud on fine mosaics, metal styluses etched notes in wax tablets, and the atrium became lit not by sunshine but by the golden glow of lamplight as the finches in the aviary tucked heads under jewel-coloured wings.

Claudia, amusing a family of kittens with a lengthy skein of wool, reflected that the Circus would be swept clean of litter and in darkness, while exhausted competitors rehydrated in taverns thronging to the rafters and spectators walked home girls they'd met at the racetrack.

She sighed as she twirled the tail of wool. By rights, she should be revelling, too, but she'd got herself into this mess and now she had to get out. Preferably without the word "exile" bandied, even in jest! Unfurling her legs and leaving the kittens mauling a sardine apiece, she wandered into the garden. Water lilies bobbed luminous and silent on the dark, still waters of the fishpond, and a tabby coiled its lazy limbs beneath a hibiscus, alert for careless moths. Someone had been collecting herbs, the air was redolent with borage, mint, and thyme, and the moon was not yet up. Such was Polemo's wealth, street sounds—drovers, carters, and carousers—were muffled by high walls faced off with honey-coloured travertine. Only a subdued clatter from the kitchens and ragged sobs from deep inside the building disturbed this oasis of tranquillity.

"Still here?" Orbilio's eyebrows lifted off their launchpads as he emerged from the body of the house, and Claudia thought she caught something other than surprise in his eyes.

"Someone has to solve the crime," she said cheerfully.

"Silly me," he murmured. "Here I was, thinking you didn't give a damn who killed Polemo and his wife, them being an unscrupulous couple who attracted enemies like flies in their ruthless quest for power—yet here you are, competing with me for a job."

Claudia smiled ingenuously and tried not to think of sixty chained slaves thrown into an arena howling for justice and for blood. "How's Lotis?"

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If her change in tactics threw him, he didn't let it show. "A real chip off the Polemo block," he said, plucking petals from a purple aster. "As the undertakers wheeled the . . . bodies away, she stood by, white-lipped, clench-fisted, but none of the wild hysterics you might expect."

You might expect, thought Claudia. Not me! The instant that girl sees emotion, she wrestles it to the ground and sits firmly on its chest to show who's boss. Although in this case, Lotis could be forgiven for breaking down, poor cow. Tradition decrees that, for the nobility especially, the body lies in state for several days, feet towards the door with torches burning at each corner and cypress laid around. In Hector's case, of course, there was no head to decorate with wreathes of oak, and to say it would be in poor taste to display Selina's bonce on its own was an understatement! No doubt something would be worked out before the funeral, but in the meantime, the undertakers had collected the remains and Lotis had stood stoical throughout. This before her sixteenth birthday!

Absently, Claudia drummed her fingernails against a bronze Apollo. "Suppose," she said, "I'm in a position to have you feted by your peers and cited for your— Orbilio? Are you listening?"

His pupils were dilated, his expression distant. Claudia blamed the twilight and thought she heard him mumble "Circe."

"Circe?" she frowned. "Circe was an enchantress!"

"And how." He gave a strange and distant smile. "She turned men into swine."

"That's not magic, Orbilio, that's human nature. Now are you ready for my proposition?"

"Always, Claudia," he muttered, and she wondered whether he'd been sniffing hemp seeds on the quiet. His eyes were raking hers intently, and any other time she might have thought he was . . .

"Right." She settled herself on a marble bench and wondered why his sandalwood unguent seemed so fresh after such a full and busy day. "My proposition is simple. In return for delivering a killer, you overlook my little scam. Is it a deal?"

"Hmmph."

Claudia spun round. The poor chap seemed to be having a coughing fit in his handkerchief, his shoulders were shaking, his eyes watering, though for one ridiculous moment, she mistook the bout for laughter.

"I'll take that as affirmative," she snapped.

The moon, rising now, reflected whiter than the lilies in the fishpond, and it was in this dark mirror she watched her tall protagonist settle his weight against a scarlet-fluted pillar.

"While you were playing Centurions and Soldiers, I've been collating information. One—" Crisply Claudia ticked the points off

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on her fingers. "Capella and Polemo were, in fact, the best of friends. Hector, being a dyed-in-the-wool expansionist—" (she should have guessed!) "—held similar political beliefs."

Polemo, dear soul, being power mad, also believed Augustus wrong in consolidating the Empire when he could be conquering the East and subduing half of Dacia.

"So friends they were. Point two—"

She swivelled round to check she had Supersleuth's attention and, finding the wicked glint in his eye off-putting to say the least, swivelled back again.

"Selina and Capella were embroiled in a passionate affair. It began eight, ten weeks ago, and in the beginning, when their furtive assignations took place up in the hills, only Selina's maid knew anything about it. Then the unimaginable happened. Selina—hard, ambitious, cold Selina—fell in love!"

And who could blame her, really? Justus Capella was, what, six years younger than her workaholic husband. He was handsome, dashing, charismatic; he simply swept her off her feet. Lately they'd meet here, making love in the bathroom, in the garden, in the bedroom, until—

"Yesterday." Claudia ticked another finger. "When—and I confess it's guesswork from now on—Selina announced she was leaving."

Across the garden, the tabby cat stretched, yawned, and decided that, moths or no moths, she really ought not abandon her kittens. Tail crooked, she padded back to the house.

"Hector went ballistic," Claudia continued. "Never, he said, had he imagined such treachery, an adulteress under his own roof, cavorting with a man he trusted. He shamed her, blamed her, threatened to disown her—"

"Ah, but did he threaten to kill her in this hypothetical scenario?"

Claudia ignored the interruption. "In fact, Hector was on the very point of throwing her into the gutter, when Guess Who turns up. Well, Polemo, being as mad as a dog with its nose in a wasps' nest—"

"Threatens to shop Capella?"

Claudia's lips pursed. Fine. Cleverclogs arrived at the same conclusion by himself, so what? A deal's a deal, and he had given his word. (All right, if you're going to be pedantic, he'd actually given his cough, but when fraud is the issue, a girl can't afford to be fussy!) Now where was she? Oh yes, Hector was on the brink of exposing Capella.

"When Justus realises his friend is serious, he brains him with a statuette—that's why Hector's head is missing. Selina, of course, is witness to the act, and the gal is horrified. Leaving Hector is one thing, but she'd been married to the man for twenty years and not without affection, and suddenly not only is she a widow, her

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lover is his murderer. Maybe she attacks him; perhaps she, too, threatens to call the army out, but whatever the circumstance, by now Capella is a desperate man. Drawing his dagger, he runs her through—hence Selina's body also has to be disposed of."

"Hm." Stroking his jaw, Marcus began to pace the path which crisscrossed the peristyle. Something was clearly bothering him, presumably the issue of why Capella would need to hide the evidence of his atrocities.

"Because," Claudia explained, without waiting for him to ask, "Justus needed time to make good his escape. By laying the two—er, pieces together in bed, he could make it appear as though there was some maniac on the loose. So!" She paused for effect. "Am I brilliant, or what?"

Time passed. A chilly breeze capered round the peristyle, wafting late summer roses and heliotrope into the air. Claudia drew her wrap tighter round her shoulders. She had expected applause, though bouquets at her feet would be nice, a standing ovation even better. Instead he kept loping up and down the path like a cheetah in a cage. Oh, well. You can't rush fraud . . .

Eventually the pacing stopped and Marcus scratched his chin. "Plausible," he muttered, "apart from—"

"Plausible!" she gasped. "Is that all you can bring yourself to say? Goddamnit, Orbilio, you have a dangerous, devious killer on the—" She broke off as the impact of his words sunk in. "Apart from what?"

"Apart from the fact, you may be wrong," he said, so quietly she had to strain to catch the words.

"I may be many things, Orbilio, but I am never wrong," she sniffed. "And if I read Capella correctly, he won't run before he's had another pop at Augustus. If I were you, I'd stop haunting this place like a lovelorn ghost and start looking for him in—"

"Oh, I know where Capella is," Orbilio said, sucking in his cheeks.

"What?" He had the assassin banged up all along? Double-duplicitous vermin-tongued skunk! He'd been winding her up . . . and enjoying every single minute! Claudia managed to turn her indignant "What!" into a mildly curious "Where?"

"Lotis, you see, was quite adamant," Marcus said, and clearly Claudia hadn't explained herself. He was rambling along at a tangent.

"Orbilio, you deaf clod, I'm asking what you've done with Capella."

"And I'm telling you," he grinned, and she was tempted to mash his nose with her fist. "You see, Lotis stumbled in on her mother, and shocked as she was at finding her dead, as I say, she was one hundred percent certain."

A strange sensation crept over Claudia. "One hundred percent certain of what?"

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"That the torso was not that of her father," Orbilio said with a sad, lopsided smile. "Which means—"

Claudia nodded in weary understanding. "The man in the bed was Capella."

6.

Confirmation arrived within the hour.

The marble merchant whose house backed onto the public gardens on the Esquiline Hill had despatched his steward with a doughty club to silence the mutt that had been howling for the past two hours, and the man reported back not with tales of a rabid dog terrorising the neighbourhood, but of a nobleman hanging from an oak, his mastiff baying at his feet. Despite the suffused face and black, protruding tongue, the steward believed he recognised the man as one Hector Polemo, regular guest at the marble merchant's table.

Lotis, orphaned now in earnest, responded by listening carefully to the legionary's report, then calling for a scribe and parchment. To the astonishment of both Claudia and Orbilio, she then proceeded to dictate a letter to her fiancé, informing him that, now she had inherited her father's empire, the marriage contract would be terminated.

There was no mention of regret.

As the breeze grew cooler and bright stars appeared, Claudia's eyes scanned walls dripping not with opulence, but with undiluted hatred. She shivered, and not from the cold.

The army had moved in, clodhopping over every room as they tried to decide whether Hector had committed suicide out of remorse or fear of public execution, and searching for some hint of where he'd left his wife's torso and his archrival's head. Would they, for instance, when dawn had broken on another glorious late-summer day, find the star-crossed lovers laid out in another ghoulish embrace?

In the atrium, Orbilio debriefed a tired centurion as soldiers trickled back and forth and the kitchens filled with smoke in an effort to feed the uniformed invasion. The silence from Lotis's room was electrifying. Claudia shuddered. The venom in this house was cloying. Contaminating. It gripped you by the throat and by the heart and refused to let you go, and she was sickened by the whole damned sordid business. She had to get away. To think. To maintain some balance of perspective!

Find a place well clear of scheming, plots, and lies, where the air was fresh and uncontaminated by treason, spite, or murder . . .

Without a word, Claudia slipped through a side door, where the night quickly swallowed her up.

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7.

The little road coiled its way up the hillside like a cobra, and with every rumble of the wheels the trackway narrowed that bit further. Weeds grew waist-high along the roadside, potholes frequent, and the greenery encroached lower by the cubit—hawthorn, oak, and juniper.

"Are you sure this is where you want to go?" the driver enquired, and Claudia nodded, picturing the ancient temple cut into the rock high upon the hill, far (so far!) from the viper's nest which formed Polemo's house. A place of solitude and peace, where air was fresh and birds warbled from the treetops, where the wind would tug your hair and tease your skirts. Oh yes. This was the place, all right! A temple shunned by locals scared of ghosts, who bent knees to ancient gods and who, while doing so, painted their bodies red like blood. The only worshippers today were lizards scuttling over fallen columns and swallows nesting in the crumbling eaves. Across the wooded valley, wide and distant, a buzzard mewed and circled.

"We can't go no further, ma'am." The driver indicated the weed-choked road.

"Then wait here," she instructed, jumping down. "I shan't be long."

The ascent was steep. Tendrils of ivy laid snares across the stony path and from time to time Claudia had to duck beneath an overhanging branch. Who cared, she thought, if her wrap snagged on a bramble? Anything to get away from the bitter atmosphere in that house just off the Via Sacra—but at least with Polemo dead, there'd be no more ugly rumours to contend with! Had she pulled it off? Had she done enough to make Supersnoop keep his bargain? Idly, she wondered what progress he and the military might be making.

Panting from the climb, Claudia approached the decaying temple, its stone now pitted by the elements, its grandeur and its elegance eroded by the forest closing in. Faint traces of paint remained—a figure dancing, a leopard in mid leap—but only rats made their devotions at the altar and these days rainwater poured the only libation. What was that? A scuffle from the hillside, a flash of—

"Stay where you are!" a voice commanded.

Claudia jumped, and despite the heat, her blood turned glacially cold. From the bushes to her left a bow protruded, its string pulled taut.

The arrowhead aimed directly at her heart.

8.

Like a coney caught in torchlight, Claudia stood mesmerised by the tiny sliver of wood which could, with one brief twang, cut short the thread of life. Her tongue was dry, her legs had turned to

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granite. This can't be happening! It has to be a dream. A dream. I'll wake up any second . . .

But the sun beat down upon her back, the buzzard mewed, and, high in the canopy, a squirrel pulled seeds from a pine cone. The bow flexed backwards in an arc, the knuckles drawing it white from the effort. Fear curdled Claudia's stomach, her head swam. Sweet Jupiter, don't let this happen. Not here. Not to me. In a spot so isolated, wolves would tear the flesh from my corpse, ants would devour my bones.

"I—" A dormouse could have squeaked louder. She cleared her throat and started again. "I know what happened at the house," she said, and this time there was no quaver in her voice. Like Lotis, Claudia was also well-versed in concealing emotion.

"Do you really?" The voice, from deep within the bushes, was heavy with sarcasm.

"Why do you think I'm here?" she said. "To gather huckleberries?"

She knew now why the bodies were mismatched. Why it was so important the missing parts should not be found.

"What did you expect to achieve?" the arrow sneered. "A confession?"

Claudia caught a movement down the path. Brown. The driver's leather jerkin?

The eyes behind the bow followed the direction of her glance. "If you're looking for the young man who brought you, you're looking in the wrong direction. Try over your shoulder!"

An eagle clawed at Claudia's heart. Oh no! Mighty Juno, say it's not true. . . . With a neck made of wood, she forced herself to look down. From this dizzy vantage point, one could see clearly the dappled mare chomping on the grass which had finally impeded their progress. The horse seemed unaware of the driver slumped face forwards with an arrow in his spine. . . .

Claudia blinked back tears and tried not to remember how he'd boasted all the way from Rome about his newborn son and pretty wife and the impending birthday celebrations for his daughter—

The bowstring. Surely the arm must be tiring? Somewhere in the recess of her mind, she remembered that killers are supposed to brag about their crimes, about how easy it was to fool the authorities.

"You'll never get away with it," she taunted. "If I, a mere civilian, can find you—"

"The army can? I doubt it!" The figure in the bushes laughed. "I know your sort," it scoffed. "In fact, we're not so very unalike when it boils down to it. You came here to satisfy yourself that you were right, to crow a bit, perhaps gain credit with the army, and you never once considered failure. I admire that."

The analysis was closer to the mark than Claudia cared to

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acknowledge. "Good." She drew a deep breath. "Because I didn't trek up to this godforsaken rat hole to get killed—I thought you might care to hear a proposition."

A long silence came from the bushes and Claudia wondered whether her last view of the world would be a broad valley with leaves just turning for autumn and paint flaking from columns. Her nails bit deep into the palms of her hands, and she felt a small dribble of blood run down her thumb.

"What put you on to me?" the voice asked, and in her mind, Claudia punched the air and thought *Yes!* The killer's ego had triumphed!

"It was," she said, with a studied air of nonchalance, "the body hanging from the oak."

The shrubbery rustled with undisguised curiosity. "Go on."

"It occurred to me that Hector might use many methods—violence, blackmail, extortion—to achieve his ends." Results meant more to him than methods. "But at heart he was a self-serving son-of-a-bitch. Men like him," she said pointedly, "don't kill themselves." They have an unerring belief that they can get away with it!

The arrowhead drooped as laughter boomed out of the bushes. "Brains as well as beauty, eh! And courage—coming here alone!"

Courage? We shall see. For here, at last, was the moment of truth. Claudia drew herself up to her full height and stared straight at where she imagined the eyes in the shrubbery to be. Her mouth was dry, her knees like aspic; she forced her voice to be even.

"That left two possible conclusions," she said. "Either someone was dressed up to look like Hector. Or Hector had been murdered. I asked myself, who, then, had a motive—and the answer, of course, was you. So I suggest we stop playing hide-and-seek, and if you do intend to fire," the nails bit deeper into her hands as she glanced around the temple, "you can bloody well look me in the eye."

Slowly the figure emerged from the thicket. "Ballsy little creature, aren't you?"

Even with the bow and quiver, he still looked dashing. Floppy sandy hair made him look younger than his years. As did that distinctive dimple in his chin. Justus Capella moved into a single shaft of sunlight. "Care to tell me how you worked it out?"

Funny how the memory plays tricks. Had Claudia not passed the basilica yesterday morning, with the rent boys preening on its corner, she might not have put two and two together.

Or in this case, two and one, for three murders had been committed yesterday. Clever, really. Because who, under such horrific circumstances, would notice a few superficial differences between Justus and the body in the bed? Same age, same height, same build—but, ah, the head, the telltale head! Capella had to stage his

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disappearance, and how better? Identifying Selina was straightforward—it was but a short leap to connect the torso with her lover.

The blame would fall on Hector, but Capella had already strangled him. All it required was to hang up the body under cover of darkness and let his mastiff raise the alarm.

"What did you do with the head of the boy you killed and left in your place?" Claudia asked. "Where's the rest of Selina?"

"Jackal bait." He shrugged, and Claudia feared she might throw up any second. For gods' sake, Selina loved this man! Had he *no* compassion?

"How many times did you and Selina make love here, with the sun warming your naked backs?" she asked. "Did you feel nothing for her, knowing how you intended to use her, should your attempt on the emperor's life fail?"

"Selina?" He frowned, as though the name was unfamiliar. "She was like a bitch in heat, played right into my hands. But you." He edged forward. "You are an altogether different woman."

Claudia realised she was supposed to feel flattered, and the queasiness inside her increased. "Then suppose I tell you we share the same cause?" she said. "That I, too, believe Mark Antony to be a daring visionary who saw a dazzling future for our people in the east, not merely consolidating what we have, but pushing out?"

"You?" Capella's eyes travelled over her breasts.

"Don't flatter yourself," Claudia tossed back her curls, "that you're alone in fearing Augustus has weakened Rome by reducing our soldiers to a mere peacekeeping force."

"Well, well, well." Capella nodded in grudging admiration. "Let's hear your proposition, then."

Claudia felt her breath come out in one loud blast. She hadn't realised, until then, she'd been holding it. "I'm rich," she explained. "I want to continue where Hector left off." Through her mind flashed the image of the driver and her stomach flipped. But man, alas, cannot turn back time—

"Croesus, we need people like you!" he said, passion firing his features. "People with courage, guts, and spirit prepared to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to get that pretender, Augustus, out of the way. And I shall, you know. Tomorrow I'll complete my task; we'll have a true democracy once more."

"Long live the Republic!" she cried.

He grinned. "Exactly. Do you have a coin?"

"Excuse me?"

"You do see, don't you," he said sombrely, "that the cause is greater than the man?"

Oh no! Scarcely able to believe her eyes, Claudia stared at the weapon in his hands. Suddenly the arrow was pointing once more

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directly at its target, and she wondered whether Capella could hear the frantic pounding as her heart wriggled to escape its fate . . . ?

"So close am I to achieving my goals," he shrugged, "I can afford to leave nothing to chance. Although if there is any consolation in your death," the bastard even sounded as though he might have meant it, "it's knowing I take no pleasure in the act. The coin, now, if you please."

Claudia did not recollect fishing the bronze from her purse, but she recalled it glinting in the sunshine.

"Put it in your mouth," Capella instructed. "You'll need to pay the ferryman to cross the River Styx."

"Sorry." Claudia tossed the coin so it landed at his feet. "I get seasick."

She watched his jaw drop open in amazement.

"But you'll need it, you callous little turd, and your crossing will be rough! Publicly and in disgrace, you'll die a lingering traitor's death in the arena, mocked and jeered by the very people you sought to save—and I tell you, Capella, I'll be in the front row, relishing every single second that you suffer!"

"Bitch," he snarled, pulling back the bowstring. "I was right not to risk my trust on you! Say hello to Hades."

"You say hello," a deep voice growled, as thirty men stepped out from under cover. Some brandished spears, some lances, and at least a dozen bowmen aimed at Justus.

The revolutionary's eyes bored into Claudia's. "You set a trap, you bitch! You kept me talking—" He made no effort to finish, as he released the bowstring.

There was a whoosh of air. A twang. Claudia spun through space. She heard a scream. A thud. And then came blackness.

Nothing else but blackness . . .

9.

"Next time I throw myself on top of you," said a disembodied baritone, "the least you could do is to struggle."

"Mmffff!" Claudia's protest, she thought, might have been more forceful, were it not for the greenery wedged in her mouth. She spat the thistle out and rubbed grit from her eyes. "Orbilio, if you ever, *ever*—"

She broke off, because he'd trotted off to supervise the arrest to which Capella, it would appear, had not taken lightly. Blood gushed from his temple as well as his knuckles, his clothes were in total disarray. Claudia picked herself off the ground, shook the dust from her skirts, and wondered why sandalwood outweighed the smell of dank weeds.

Embedded in a silver birch behind her, an arrow quivered.

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"You were saying?" Marcus grinned, taking the temple steps two at a time.

Claudia's response was a stinging slap across his face. "You took your bloody time!" she spat. "Because of your pathetic dithering, that poor sod," she jerked her thumb towards the driver, "took an arrow in the back!"

A red mark flared down the side of his cheek, but the twinkle in his eyes flared brighter. "He was one of ours," he said. "We had him padded out with leather and a man hidden from the rig to warn him when and what would happen. In fact," Orbilio sniffed miserably, "we'll probably lose him to the theatre after this."

He deftly ducked the chunk of masonry which whizzed past his ear.

"So I was not in any danger?"

"None," Orbilio said, swerving the branch of blackthorn she was brandishing. "While you were diverting Capella's attention by making your ascent, our men were circling from behind—"

"I was scared witless!"

"Which is why Capella was so completely taken in," Marcus said. "In fact, your performance was even more convincing than the driver's."

"That," Claudia said haughtily, "is because I never, ever fake it!"

His laughter echoed round the crumbling temple. "Can I give you a lift back to Rome?" he asked.

"Never in your life," she snapped. "We're quits, remember?"

Marcus bounded down the path behind her. "Yes, about that little scam you wanted me to overlook?"

"Hm?"

Her mind had already dismissed her role in coercing a confession from Capella. Life moves on, not backwards, and Claudia had a call to pay on little Lotis. Fifteen years of age? Far too young to cope with Polemo's massive empire—my, my, if ever a child needed a friend, it's now! Someone she can lean on, someone she can trust, can let her feelings go with. And who better than an expert in the trade?

Orbilio paused to examine the bark of a wild pear tree and his shoulders, from the back, appeared to be shaking. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what that scam was, by any chance . . . ?"

Claudia gazed back at the ancient temple which had been gouged so painstakingly out of the rock and which had now virtually been reclaimed by the land. What more perfect spot, she wondered, in which to hide a body? Especially that of a tall, dark, handsome investigator.

"Marcus," she said artlessly. "Why don't you take my arm, dear?" ●

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THE LADDIE VANISHES

by Edward D. Hoch

Felicity Sloane's first impression of PC Derek Chamberlain was that he seemed too young to be a police constable. His photo on the laminated Edinburgh police ID he held up for her inspection made him appear even younger, showing a sly smile that went well with his coal-black hair and deep brown eyes. "Police officer, ma'am," he said as the London to Edinburgh express sped north through the night.

"What have I done?" she asked playfully. He was in plain clothes, after all, and lacked the instant intimidation of a uniformed officer.

The sly smile danced about his full lips. "Nothing, I hope. I'm searching the train for a young, dark-haired Scotsman with a port-wine birthmark on his left cheek near his ear." He indicated the area on his own face. "Have you seen anything of him?"

She shook her head. "No. What's he done?"

"Killed a bloke last winter in Edinburgh, then fled to the Continent. Customs spotted him when he re-entered the country at Dover a few days ago. I'm returning him to Scotland for trial."

"And he got away from you?"

"Not far. He went to the loo and somehow slipped out when I wasn't looking. But he certainly didn't jump off a train travelling at a hundred kilometres an hour. He's on here somewhere. I've got the guard searching from the front of the train. I wonder if you could come with me and help search from the rear."

"All right," she agreed readily enough. The overnight express to Scotland was a dull journey at best, with nothing to be seen out of

When asked how he can produce so many stories, Mr. Hoch usually answers that ideas come to him easily. Example: this story's title, and with it the fact that it would have to somehow involve a Scottish character, came to him in the space of an escalator ride. At the foot of the escalator he was asked to write a story for an anthology about missing persons, and by the time he reached the next floor, he knew the tale would be about a Scots "laddie." Amazing!

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the windows for seven hours but the reflection of one's own face. This, at least, promised to be something of an adventure.

"I may need you to check the loos for me," he explained as they headed toward the rear of the train. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Felicity Sloane. I'm a fashion illustrator in London."

"You're going the wrong way."

She smiled. "Up to Scotland to visit my parents for the long weekend." Then, "Have you ever lost a prisoner before?"

"No, ma'am, and I never will again, if I have to go to the loo with them. I only looked away from that door for an instant when the guard came through, but that must have been all the time he needed."

"Didn't anyone else in your carriage notice him?"

"They were mostly asleep. And of course Angus Selkirk meant nothing to them. He was just another passenger."

"Angus Selkirk." She repeated the name as they moved into the next carriage. "Do you think he's dangerous?"

"Any man who kills another human being is dangerous."

"No, I mean do you think he's dangerous now? Will he resist arrest?"

"I believe he will."

"Are you armed?"

Chamberlain shook his head. "We were escorted to the train and we're being met at the other end. The theory is that an express train is like one long tunnel. While it's moving there's no escape. The prisoner is only handcuffed to me when we're entering or leaving the train. While on board, a weapon might only cause casualties if it fell into the prisoner's hands."

They had covered half the train when they came upon the guard, a grim-faced man named Mortimer. "Any luck?" the constable asked.

The guard shook his head. "I found four passengers who remembered seeing the man with the birthmark on his face, but there's no sign of him now."

"I'd like to speak to them." Then, remembering her presence, he added, "This is Felicity Sloane. She's helping with the search."

The guard acknowledged her presence with a nod. "Follow me, please."

Mortimer led them toward the front of the train. "This is where we were seated," PC Chamberlain said, indicating two empty seats facing the loo.

"I remember you," a middle-aged woman across the aisle said. The white-haired man accompanying her nodded his agreement. "And the laddie with the birthmark on his face."

"He was a prisoner I was escorting back to Scotland," Chamber-

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lain explained. "He went to the loo and seems to have disappeared. Did you see him alone, without me?"

Both travellers shook their heads. "We might have been dozing," the man admitted.

The memory of a young woman in the seat behind them was much the same. She remembered the man with the birthmark but hadn't noticed where he went. A teenage boy a few seats back had also noticed Angus Selkirk, but he'd been reading a homework assignment on his way back to school after visiting his father in London for the weekend. "I'll keep an eye out," the guard promised, moving on about his business.

"He could have jumped from the train," Felicity suggested.

Chamberlain shook his head. "Selkirk isn't the suicidal type."

"What type is he?"

The constable shrugged. "Twenty years old, a minor criminal record until last February when he assaulted a bloke at an automatic teller machine. He stole the man's money and car, and the victim died of his injuries the following day. The car was recovered with Selkirk's fingerprints on it. He's not the smartest criminal in the world. But by that time he'd used some of the stolen money to buy a plane ticket to Paris. The French police weren't able to trace him after he landed, but we knew the money would run out and we were betting he'd head back here to continue his life of crime. All customs stations have been watching for him for several months. They caught him at Dover, the most likely crossing point."

"What about his parents?"

"They're still in Edinburgh, but he's been on his own about three years now. There's a sister too, though he never sees her."

Felicity pondered the life of this young man who'd been fleeing for so long. "I suppose it was the birthmark that made him such an outcast."

He shook his head. "I don't buy that excuse. Plenty of people have overcome deformities a lot worse than his. And there's laser treatment for such things these days." They sat for a moment in one of the empty seats, and when his jacket sleeve slid up a bit she noticed a small tattooed word—*taureau*—above his right wrist. She was about to suggest that police constables might wish to have tattoos removed in the same manner, but then decided it was none of her business. Such things were not uncommon among young people these days.

In the middle of the night the restaurant car was empty, but the adjoining buffet bar still had a few customers, including a nun in a traditional wimple who was seated alone eating a toffee bar of some sort. In a first-class carriage was a young man with a ban-

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daged face. She gripped Derek Chamberlain's arm. "What about him? The bandage could be covering his birthmark."

He shook his head. "The guard mentioned him right off, but he's been on the train since London."

"Forgetting the bandage, does the rest of him look like Selkirk?"

"Not really. His clothes are different. And his hair is longer than Selkirk's."

"The clothes might have been changed and the hair could be a wig. I saw an old movie once where a woman vanished on a train and they hid her by having her all bandaged up."

"The bad guys, of course! Come on." She was warming to the chase.

The youth with the bandaged face glanced up as they paused by his seat.

Chamberlain said to the older woman sitting opposite the youth, "I'm searching for an escaped criminal, ma'am. Could I see some identification for yourself and the young man?"

"He's my son. He's had a bit of plastic surgery in London and we're returning home." She showed them her driver's license.

Chamberlain studied it and handed it back. "Thank you, Mrs. . . . Elfin. And your son is . . .?"

"I'm Robert," he said with a noticeable Scottish accent.

The constable studied his face and eyes for only a moment. "Thank you, both of you. Sorry to have bothered you."

Back in the corridor he told Felicity, "That's not him. When I got a closer look I knew right away it wasn't."

He knocked on the loo door at the end of the carriage and a woman's voice answered. "Occupied!"

"Sorry, ma'am. This is the police. If you'll unlock the door a female will glance inside. We're searching for an escaped prisoner."

They heard the bolt slide open and the door opened barely an inch. "Show me some ID," the woman said. Chamberlain produced his card and the door opened enough for Felicity to peek inside.

"Check behind the door," the constable instructed. She did, but there was no one hiding.

Felicity thanked the woman and they moved on. "She looked a bit ill. Maybe train travel doesn't agree with her."

"After tonight it doesn't agree with me, either. Unless I find Selkirk I'll be back directing traffic on Princes Street."

They reached the front of the train without finding the missing prisoner. "Look," Felicity said, "we have to go about this in a more organised manner. Somehow he might have got by us as we searched the train, and then doubled back to the rear."

They found Mortimer, the guard, again and he agreed to come through behind them in case Selkirk revealed himself. Once more

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everything was checked. When they reached the other end of the train and Mortimer caught up with them, he said simply, "The man you describe is not on this train."

"But he was on it!" Chamberlain argued. "You heard those witnesses. They saw me with him."

"Wait a minute," said Felicity. "The witnesses really saw nothing but that birthmark. Suppose it was a fake?"

He shook his head. "No chance. I've seen mug shots of him from the time of his first arrest. The birthmark was always there."

"Then he covered it up somehow."

"We already checked the laddie with the bandaged face," he reminded her. "No other person on this train has his face covered."

"No other man," she corrected.

"What?"

"There was a nun wearing a wimple when we passed through earlier. That wimple could have covered most of Angus Selkirk's birthmark."

"But he would have needed an accomplice on the train for that, someone to supply the nun's habit. No one could have known which train we'd be on."

"The trains to Edinburgh and the east coast of Scotland leave from King's Cross, don't they?"

"Well, yes," he admitted.

"An accomplice could easily guess you'd be returning Selkirk to Scotland today or tomorrow. Someone could have waited at the station with the nun's habit in a bag until they saw him, then simply followed the two of you on board, waiting for him to give you the slip."

"I suppose so." Chamberlain sighed. "We'd better go and check her out. But you'll have to do that."

The nun was still seated in the same compartment, and she smiled as they entered. Her name was Sister Benedict. "I've been to London for the computer show," she explained. "Our convent is purchasing several and I have to decide which model is best for our needs. There are plenty of people in Edinburgh to advise us, but I wanted to know about the very latest advances."

PC Chamberlain smiled and showed his identification. "I have to ask you a great favour, Sister Benedict, and I trust you won't feel it is too much of an imposition. While I wait in the corridor, could you remove your wimple for Miss Sloane here? We're searching for an escaped criminal and I—"

"It's no problem," she assured them. "I often go without it these days, but Mother Superior thought it might be safer to wear it travelling to London. It does garner a certain degree of respect."

Felicity knew before the uncovering took place that this was truly a woman, but she went through with it while Chamberlain

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paced the corridor outside. "You're very beautiful," she said, staring at Sister Benedict's unmarked cheeks. "Thank you so much for helping us."

"It was no trouble at all."

"There are eight carriages on this train," Felicity told Derek Chamberlain, "and we've been through them all. Your man is nowhere on this train. He must have slipped out of the loo, opened the door, and jumped. There's no other possibility."

"Someone would have seen him!" the constable protested.

"You didn't see him leave the loo and you were awake. Most of the other passengers were dozing."

"I suppose you have a point," he conceded. "Any other ideas?"

She thought about it. "What's at the front of the train? Is there a luggage compartment?"

He chuckled at the idea. "You've been seeing too many old movies."

They sought out Mortimer once more. He verified that the train carried sacks of mail in the carriage behind the engine. "But it's locked," he informed them. "No one goes in there."

"You must have a key in case of emergencies."

He conceded that there was an emergency key. "It's locked up in the guard's van. But you can't go in there."

Chamberlain brought out his badge and ID again. His photo was beginning to curl a bit at one corner. "This badge gives me the right to go there or anywhere else in the investigation of a crime! I'm not going to touch your mailbags. I just want to check for any possible hiding place."

Felicity trailed along as they walked through the first-class coach to the locked door. Mortimer turned the key and the metal door swung open. The overhead lights were turned on, revealing tan sacks of woven plastic, each bearing the bold letters "Royal Mail." They were secured at the top and though each was about a metre in height they could not have hidden even a small man. On this trip, at least, there was no place in the mail coach for Angus Selkirk or anyone else to have hidden.

PC Chamberlain seemed at a loss as to his next move. They left the mail coach and the guard relocked it. "What's the next stop?" Chamberlain asked Mortimer as they returned to the guard's van.

"There's no scheduled stop until Edinburgh in the morning."

"You could stop at Newcastle."

The grim-faced Mortimer shook his head. "Only in emergencies. This is the Edinburgh express."

"This is an emergency, damn it! I need to contact the authorities and begin a search of the track area. I'm beginning to think my laddie must have jumped after all."

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"If he jumped from this train when it was moving at top speed you can stop worrying about him getting away. He'll be right there waiting for you. As for contacting the authorities, you can use a telephone here on the train."

"No, I can't. Anyone can listen in on a cellular phone if they have the right equipment, and Selkirk has lots of friends in the underworld. I need a secure ground line to Edinburgh and Scotland Yard. If he's off this train and still alive we need to find him before they do."

The guard thought about it and then picked up a telephone that connected him to the driver. He identified himself and said, "We have a passenger on board, PC Derek Chamberlain. A prisoner he was escorting gave him the slip and apparently jumped off the train. He's requesting to be dropped off at Newcastle so he can report to his superiors over a safe phone line." Mortimer listened and glanced at his watch. "I'll tell him."

"Will he do it?" the constable asked.

Mortimer nodded. "We pass through Newcastle in thirty-four minutes. Be ready to get off. He can only stop for a few seconds."

"That's good enough."

Felicity followed him to a seat near a door. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help."

He shrugged. "We did what we could. We certainly established he's nowhere on the train."

"Will you have to spend the rest of the night searching for the body?"

"I hope not. There are others to do that."

Felicity turned to stare out at the darkness. "Did you grow up in Edinburgh?"

"That I did. I'm a home boy. Never been farther away than London until this trip to Dover. The way it turned out, I should have stayed at home."

"Don't blame yourself."

"Who else is there to blame?"

Occasionally they passed through a town where a few lights broke the darkness, but it was not until the train reached the outskirts of Newcastle that the night began to brighten. "I'll be leaving now," he said as the train rumbled across the bridge over the Tyne. "Thanks for your help."

The train was slowing for its brief stop at the station. He held out his hand to shake hers as the guard came forward to open the door. "Derek . . .?" she said as she took it.

"What?"

"I have one more solution."

"After the bandaged face and the nun and the luggage compartment?" His eyes were laughing at her now.

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"Yes. One place I never thought to look."

"Come on if you're coming!' the guard bellowed as the train slowed to a stop.

"Where's that?" Chamberlain asked her.

"Right here, right before my eyes. You are Angus Selkirk, and it was PC Chamberlain who was thrown from the train."

He would have been wiser to have laughed at her and walked away. As it was, her words so panicked him that he pushed her aside in the aisle and bolted for the door. Mortimer grabbed at him, but the effect was to throw the fleeing man off balance. He fell to the station platform and a uniformed officer hurried over to assist him.

"I'm PC Chamberlain," he tried to say, holding up his badge and photo ID for the last time.

But now Felicity was on him. "That's not true!" she shouted to the officer. "He's an escaped murderer named Selkirk!" And to prove it she grabbed at the laminated identification card and peeled off his photograph, revealing an entirely different photo underneath, that of a slightly older man with a birthmark on his cheek.

The officer's face hardened. "You'd better come along with me, sir. Impersonating a policeman is a serious offence. And you too, miss."

It was some time later, as dawn was breaking over the city of Newcastle, that Felicity got to tell her story to an inspector named Rollings. "When did you first become suspicious of this man, Miss Sloane?" he asked pleasantly.

"Well, he showed his ID to someone and I noticed one corner of his photo was beginning to curl. But the thing was laminated, don't you see, and the photo should have been under the lamination, not on top of it. I think PC Chamberlain probably went into the loo with Selkirk and somehow Selkirk managed to overpower him and kill him there. With the passengers dozing or asleep it wasn't difficult for him to hoist Chamberlain's body a few feet and open the train door. The constable was gone into the night and Selkirk now had his badge and identification. He must have been carrying an extra passport photo for emergencies like this. He cut it down to size and stuck it over Chamberlain's photo on the ID."

"Stuck it with what?"

"Anything sticky! A bit of softened toffee from the buffet bar would have done the trick. Now only one problem remained for him. He had to get the train to stop somewhere before the Edinburgh station, where the police would be waiting for their prisoner and would be sure to recognise him. He went about this in a clever manner. First he persuaded me that he was a constable escorting

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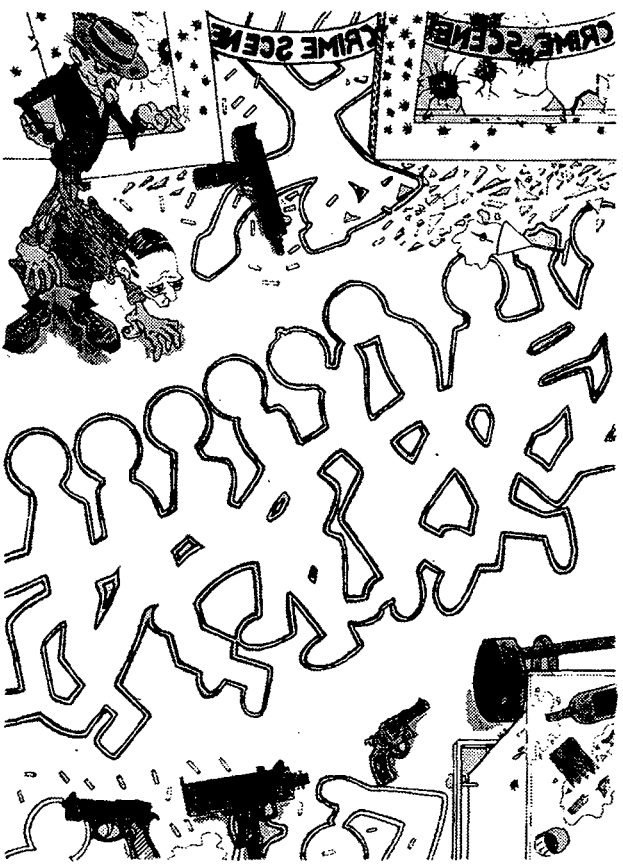
a prisoner and then he described Chamberlain's birthmarked face as being that of the prisoner Selkirk. We spent over an hour searching the train, aided by the guard, before he decided he had to get off and organise a search party for the body. Once he was free in Newcastle, of course, he'd have been on his way."

Inspector Rollings was amazed. "All that from a curled-up photo?"

"There was one other thing," she admitted. "When he put out his hand to shake mine as he was leaving the train, I caught another glimpse of the word *taureau* tattooed above his right wrist. It's a French word, but he said he'd never been farther away than Dover. Selkirk had just come back from France, and the word *taureau* means bull in French. I've been to Paris several times doing my fashion illustrations and I know the language."

"Bull?"

Felicity nodded. "Selkirk's first name is Angus, remember, as in Black Angus cattle. I imagine he got the tattoo over there to impress the French ladies." ●



"Conga line got caught in the Crossfire."

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Art by Mark Evans

Weren't You Todd Jarvis?

by Percy Spurlark Parker

"Weren't you Todd Jarvis?"

Ever since TV Land started showing reruns of old TV series, it seems like I get asked that question a half-dozen times a day. I've gone from a flat out "NO," to saying he's my second cousin on my mother's side, to actually owning up to it. The truth is, I'm still Todd Jarvis. I'm just not Todd Jarvis a.k.a. Danny Doggett, Private Eye.

The series went off the air sixteen years ago and with the exception of a very few bit parts the following couple of years, so did my acting career. The career has been stone cold dead for a good eleven years now. That was the last time I stepped before the cameras, a ten-second spot in a beer commercial. I didn't even have any lines.

I was never very good with money—keeping it, that is. When I

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was on top and the big bucks were rolling in, I had it rolling out just as fast. I was married for about two seconds back then also. A young, up-and-coming starlet. She's gone through three husbands since, and the starlet label has been changed to major motion-picture star. But somehow, whenever I read a bio of hers, I'm never able to find any mention of me.

I eventually moved out of L. A., getting only as far as Vegas. If an offer came my way, I wanted to be able to make a quick dash back. But, as I've said, the beer commercial was the last show-biz thing I've done in a while.

Chicagoan Percy Spurlark Parker retired to Las Vegas several years ago but "Weren't You Todd Jarvis?" is his first story to make use of the Las Vegas locale. Complete with a Howard Hughes-style billionaire and a displaced Hollywood actor, the tale displays Mr. Parker's gentle knack for giving the expected a wry twist. We'll have another Parker story for you later in the year. ¶

At first, I was willing to kill to get my career going again. A figure of speech? The way I really felt? I honestly don't know, the opportunity never presented itself so I never had to prove it.

I'm selling shoes for In Style Footwear, in the Fashion Show Mall on the Strip these days, have been for some time. My four-year-old Hyundai is almost paid for, and I've got a little condo near Spring Mountain and Decatur. I guess there are other has-beens who have a worse existence.

"Excuse me, but aren't you Todd Jarvis?"

"What did you say?"

The guy's long pale face crunched into a frown. "Sir, I asked if you were Todd Jarvis. I am correct, aren't I? You are Mr. Jarvis?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. It's just refreshing to be referred to in the present tense."

My reply didn't relieve the quizzical look on his face.

We were in the shoe store and things had been rather slow this morning. In fact, there had only been one customer, a size seven who insisted she was a size six. I was at the counter going over the *Review-Journal*'s sport pages and hadn't even looked up when the guy came in.

"My employer has sent me to extend a dinner invitation for this evening. He instructed me to tell you it would be most beneficial to you if you would attend."

The guy couldn't stand any straighter as he spoke, he was practically rigid. Bearing like that only comes from years in domestic service, or the military. His dark blue suit fitted him too well to be

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government issue, thus he had to be somebody's butler.

"Just who is this employer of yours?"

"Reginald Aldridge. You've heard of him?"

"Who hasn't?"

They say lightning isn't supposed to strike in the same place twice. In the case of Reginald Aldridge and Howard Hughes, it had on several occasions. Aldridge was alternately known as Hughes's shadow and illegitimate twin. Both men had had a penchant for aviation and had gone from the movie industry into trying to buy up all of Las Vegas. Whenever Hughes bought a casino, Aldridge had to have another one also. A track of land, ditto for Aldridge. It was said that if there was a part of Vegas Hughes didn't own, Aldridge did.

The competition sort of melted away as Hughes became more and more reclusive and his corporation started selling off his holdings. When Hughes died, he was little more than a bunch of skin and bones with an unkempt beard and unclipped fingernails. Aldridge kind of dropped out of sight around then also. His public appearances dwindled to about once every other year, although he still gets mentioned in the business sections on a regular basis. He's got to be well into his eighties by now, if not older.

"May I tell him you will attend?"

It had to be a gag, although I couldn't think of who would pull a prank like this. I've made a number of acquaintances over the years, but no one I could call a real friend. And it's generally your friends who get a bang out of setting you up. Maybe it was *Candid Camera;* I'd heard they were back on the air.

"Yeah, why not? I'll be there."

"Excellent. Seven sharp. Mr. Aldridge is a stickler for punctuality." He pulled a white envelope from his inside coat pocket. "You'll find instructions in here on how to reach the compound, or I could send a limousine for you."

"Limo works for me." I was curious to see how far the joke was going to go.

The envelope disappeared back inside his coat pocket. "Very well, I will have a car at your residence at six P.M."

"You know where I live?"

"Of course."

The limo was there at six on the dot. I'd gotten home in time to shower and change into the better of the two suits I currently owned, a brown double-breasted gabardine. The limo ride reminded me of my L. A. days. The rear passenger compartment had a fully stocked bar and a humidor of richly aromatic cigars. I wasn't sure when the gag was going to end, but I was going to enjoy it while it lasted. The cognac was as light and smooth as

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crushed velvet and the cigars as mellow tasting as I've ever encountered. Whoever was behind this was going to pay the price for fooling with Todd Jarvis.

The trip didn't take quite an hour through drive-time traffic, straight west on Sahara into the setting sun. Vegas sits in a valley, thus any direction out of the city is on an incline to the mountains. Sahara, like most routes, is pretty gradual, not like the roller-coaster streets of San Francisco. I stopped looking at street signs after we passed Hualapai Way. One patch of desert is the same as another to me. Finally we pulled off onto a side road, going about another quarter-mile and coming to a rather formidable-looking wrought-iron gate. And an armed, uniformed guard.

The driver and I both had to show the guard our driver's licenses before he buzzed the gate open.

Desert landscaping is symmetrically placed cactuses and rocks on a sea of sand. Three quarters of the land leading up to the house was done that way, hardy cactuses abutting smooth reddish-brown rocks. But the land surrounding the sprawling stucco mansion displayed a rich green lawn, as manicured as a pro golf course. The driveway forked, as if a border was needed to separate the two diverse landscapes.

The butler and another security guard, a dark-haired young man with a thin moustache, were waiting outside as the limo pulled up. The security guard opened the door for me. I pocketed a handful of cigars before I climbed out.

"Mr. Jarvis," the butler greeted.

"In person," I cracked. "Say, I didn't get your name before."

"Samuels, sir. I'm sorry, it was remiss of me not to mention it earlier. If you'll follow me, please, Mr. Aldridge will be most happy you've arrived."

The house was a two-story monster that seemed to go on forever. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd had part of the Grand Canyon tucked away in a corner somewhere. Samuels led me through a high-ceilinged living room that flowed into a library. From there we skirted the indoor swimming pool and went into a room that held a regulation pool table at one end and a projection TV at the other. There were also three women in the room, all redheads, all very beautiful. A quick guess put their age range at mid twenties for the youngest, to maybe forty-five for the eldest. And, I'll admit to my surprise, Reginald Aldridge was also there.

I'd never seen the man in person, and when the newspapers used a picture of him it was usually file stuff from his younger days. But the man approaching me with his hand outstretched was Reginald Aldridge, there was no mistaking it. Older, stouter, his hair white with just a hint of its once fiery glow, yet age had

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not disguised his prominent cheekbones, his jutting chin, the deep set of his eyes.

"Todd Jarvis. It's indeed a pleasure."

I'm not a runt, I work out semi-regularly, but his hand enveloped mine and his grip was as close to a vice as I care to get.

"Mr. Aldridge," I said, flexing my fingers to get the circulation back.

"God, you don't know how happy this makes me. Todd Jarvis. You know, my boy, few actors embody the characters they play: Bogart, the Duke. I put you right up there with them. It was never Danny Doggett, for me. It was always Todd Jarvis, Private Eye. You fought the bad guys. You solved the murders."

Maybe being a recluse and being wacko go hand in hand. Hell, I was an actor in a TV series, popular to a point. But my best work didn't even approach Bogart's or Wayne's lesser offerings.

Aldridge put an arm around my shoulder. "Come on, I want you to meet my daughters. Girls."

The three women came over to us, lining up with the youngest on our left. Side by side, the resemblance was more than just the color of their hair. They each had the same pert upturned nose, one interchangeable with the other.

"This is Jessica," Aldridge said, referring to his oldest daughter first. "Meredith. Sara Anne. Todd Jarvis, one of my all-time favorites."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Jarvis," Sara Anne said. If I had to call it, she was the best looking of the three, with wide green eyes and dimpled cheeks. But she didn't win my vote by much.

"Ditto," Meredith echoed. She wore the sleekest gown, a form-fitting golden number that shimmered with each breath she took.

"May I get you a drink?" Jessica asked. She wore her hair shorter than her sisters', fluffed and curled. A single strand of pearls rested an inch above her ample cleavage.

"Actually, some cognac would be great."

"Good choice," she said, and as she whirled away I got a faint whiff of her perfume, something light and airy with a hint of musk.

"I caught one of your old shows last week," Sara Anne said. "Who was the guy who played your younger brother? He was really cute."

"Bill Moore. He's married with a half-dozen kids now. He's been doing a lot of directing the last few years."

"He was in seventy-nine out of a hundred and thirteen episodes," Aldridge injected. "I believe the bad guys used him twice as a lever to force you to do their bidding. But you prevailed, you always did."

"Er, yeah, I guess so," I said. I couldn't have argued with him if

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I'd wanted to. I'd forgotten the number of *Danny Doggett* episodes that were made until he blurted it out. He could easily be right about Bill's participation as well. But how the hell did he know that kind of stuff anyway?

"Are you married, Mr. Jarvis?" Meredith asked, her gown breathing at me.

"Not for a long time," I said, as Jessica returned with my drink.

The cognac was better than the bottle in the limo. It tiptoed a warm path down my throat as I swallowed.

"Careful with Meredith, Mr. Jarvis, she just got rid of one husband."

"Don't you mean you did, Father?" she responded, her eyes narrowing.

"A matter of semantics, dear."

Meredith was about to say something else when Jessica stepped in. "Relax, Meredith, you know how Father is when it comes to suitable mates for his daughters."

Aldridge cleared his throat. "Come with me, Mr. Jarvis. We'll let them discuss my merits in private."

He turned and walked away, which left me little to do but shrug my predicament to the sisters and follow him.

He led me to an adjoining room, closing the door behind me as I entered. It was a small study with a desk and a computer; bookshelves and file cabinets occupied the walls. He sat at the desk, offered me a cigar from a silver humidor.

"Maybe later," I said, plucking one out of the humidor and sticking it in my pocket with the ones I'd gotten out of the limo.

Aldridge straightened himself in his chair. "I suppose you'd like to know why I invited you here this evening?"

I nodded. "The question has been with me for a while." I'd no sooner got that out, than a possible answer flashed on me. "Say, this isn't some husband-hunting scheme for one of your daughters, is it?"

"No, although I'd enjoy the opportunity to call you son, I've asked you here for a much graver purpose." He paused. "I want you to stop a murder."

"A what?" It wasn't that I hadn't heard him, we were right across the desk from each other and he wasn't whispering, it was just that I didn't believe what I'd heard.

"I want to hire you to prevent a murder, Mr. Jarvis. One of my daughters is trying to kill me. She's already tried twice."

"Mr. Aldridge, excuse me, but this is ridiculous, I'm no policeman."

"You're better than any policeman. I've watched the shows, I know."

"I'm an actor, Mr. Aldridge. Or, a former one."

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"You're the heart and soul of Danny Doggett. You are the private eye. I need you to do this for me."

"I assure you, Mr. Aldridge, this is a mistake. Why pick me?"

"You're the only one I can trust. I knew it when I saw the Black Widow episode."

Great, another episode I couldn't remember.

"She had framed her husband for her lover's murder." Aldridge nodded at me, as though expecting me to chime in with him. "All you had to do was remain silent and you could have had her and all her husband's money as well. But no, your code of ethics wouldn't allow that to happen."

More and more, Reginald Aldridge was validating the statement that all nuts weren't in the nut house.

"I'll pay you handsomely."

I had a pocket full of cigars and had had some awfully good cognac. I figured I was ahead of the game.

"What do you want? Five? Ten? Twenty thousand? You name it."

They say money corrupts, and the thought of it was starting to do a hell of a job on me. I hadn't heard figures like that thrown around for quite some time.

Aldridge went into his desk drawer and pulled out a business-sized Manila envelope. Hundred-dollar bills spilled out as he tossed it on the desk. "There's five thousand dollars there. Please take it, consider it a retainer."

There's good and bad in all of us, one side constantly waging war with the other, keeping us on the straight and narrow. My good side lasted about ten seconds. I only had one inside coat pocket, so I had to dump the cigars on his desk before I tucked the envelope full of cash away.

"You said there have already been two attempts on your life?"

Aldridge looked at the pile of cigars on his desk; his white eyebrows furrowed, then relaxed. "Yes. Once last week. The belt on my treadmill was cut. I'd been on it about fifteen minutes when it snapped. I almost broke my neck when I fell. As it is, I bruised my knee pretty badly."

He started to stand. I guess he was going to show me the black and blue marks, but I waved him off.

"The other attempt happened this morning. I slipped on a patch of suntan lotion conveniently smeared next to my chaise longue. It was fortunate for me I fell into the pool and not onto the marble tile. That's why I had to get you here right away."

The treadmill could've simply worn out, and the suntan lotion was probably a case of someone being careless, but it's funny how quickly a person can get attached to five thousand dollars.

"Do you have any suspicions as to which of your daughters it

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could be? Which would have the strongest motive? The best opportunity?"

Aldridge clapped his hands together. "That's wonderful, Mr. Jarvis. Deep, insightful questions. I knew I picked the right man."

Damn, I guess I had sounded like ol' Danny Doggett. Maybe Aldridge was starting to rub off on me.

"I really couldn't point out one of my children over the other, Mr. Jarvis. They're each by different women, you know. My first wife died in a boating accident. My second wife was a suicide. And my third wife, Sara Anne's mother, is in a local mental institution, has been there for years."

I'd made up my mind, I was out of here the first chance I got.

"My daughters all live here with me. Oh, they've taken their turn running off with this man or that, getting married on occasion. But nothing has ever come of any relationships they've had. For the most part, the men were nothing but penniless tramps. When they found out they couldn't get to my money through my daughters, they were off to greener pastures." Aldridge took a deep breath. "So, I guess I've said all this just to say that each of my daughters has had the same opportunity. And, perhaps in some way, the same motive."

There was a lot more between the lines that had not been said. Aldridge ran roughshod over his daughters' lives. Even when they'd gone off with their current catch of the day, Aldridge was in control. He might even have been the cause of his various wives' demises, both physically and mentally. Now whether someone was trying to kill him or his conscience was bothering him was another matter.

"You haven't given me much to go on, Mr. Aldridge. This might not be such an easy task." I couldn't think of anything else to say, just trying to buy some time until I got my tail out of there.

"I'm not worried, Mr. Jarvis. I have complete confidence in you. Like the case when the snake charmer was found strangled to death in the locked room. It seemed impossible then, but you figured it out."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I do get lucky," I said, wondering if the old nut could recite the plot of every episode of *Danny Doggett.*

"Now, is there anything you want me to do? Any way I can help you smoke out which of my lovely children is trying to kill me?"

"I thing we'd best just play it by ear for now. Give me a chance to get better acquainted with your daughters. What's for dinner?"

"Fillet and double-baked potatoes. I remembered from the show you were a meat-and-potatoes man."

I actually had a more adventurous palate, but the idea of a thick juicy fillet was enough to make me want to hang around for dinner.

We rejoined Aldridge's daughters in the other room. Jessica was

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at the small bar mixing herself another drink. Sara Anne and Meredith were sitting in the near corner across from each other in two matching burgundy wingback chairs.

"May I freshen your drink, Mr. Jarvis?" Jessica asked.

"Can't we drop the 'mister' by now? Makes me feel like I'm at a church social."

"Ha," Aldridge laughed. "That's from 'The Murderer's Waltz,' at the cocktail party. Episode sixty-three, I believe."

"Father, really," Jessica said in a huff. "You can't possibly know all the episodes."

"But I'm right. Tell her, Todd, my boy."

Damn, could I have been going around quoting Danny Doggett for the past sixteen years? "You're the expert," I said, facing Jessica so she was the only one to see me rolling my eyes.

She had a wide smile on her lips as she brought me another cognac.

"Did you ever say if you were married, Mister, er, Todd?" Sara Anne asked. She was at my side now, her dimples beaming.

"Yes," Meredith said. She had remained seated, and somehow managed to cross her legs in her clinging gown. "Are you available—fresh meat, as it were?"

"I don't know how fresh, but available, yes."

"Splendid," Sara Anne squealed. "Should we draw straws?"

"I've always favored cutting cards," I said, looking over to Aldridge. "That's not another line from one of the shows, is it?"

He thought for a moment, a hand to his chin. "No, no, that was never in the show, but it's something Danny Doggett would say."

Samuels came into the room, formal and rigid as ever. "If you're ready for dinner, sir, Cook has everything prepared."

Jessica was back by the bar. Meredith stood, her gown caressing her body.

"I'm famished," Sara Anne said.

"Same here, my dear," Aldridge seconded.

The lights went out. There was no warning, no gradual graying, just sudden blackness. Someone brushed past me, accompanied by a light airy breeze. Then there were gunshots. Two quick roars and a chorus of screams.

When the lights came back on, it took a moment or two for my eyes to focus. Sara Anne, Jessica, and Meredith were gathering around me, and we in turn were watching Samuels as he knelt on the floor by Aldridge's body. There was a small pearl-handled revolver on the floor next to Aldridge. Samuels reached over, picking it up. He looked at the gun, then up to us. I wasn't sure if it was the sisters' screaming or the pumping of my own heart that was ringing in my ears.

"You killed him," Jessica cried out.

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"What? I . . ." Samuels started.

"Drop the gun," someone shouted.

It was the young security guard who'd opened the limo door for me. He was standing just inside the room, his own gun drawn. "I said drop it."

"But . . . er . . . I . . ." Samuels stammered, swinging around to face the guard.

The security guard only fired once, a head shot. Samuels crumpled over backwards, the revolver still clutched in his hand.

"Danny Doggett, Private Eye," the homicide detective said with a nod. He was beefy. He wore his hair long, but not enough to hide his protruding ears. "Yeah, I used to watch your show all the time when I was in high school. Good to see the reruns back on the air."

I thanked him, even gave him a couple of autographs, one for his wife and one for his folks up in Oregon.

The investigation consisted of him taking our statements, vocalizing a summation, and passing on his condolences before he left. The Aldridge sisters' statements and mine were virtually the same. The lights went out, shots were fired, the lights came on, Samuels was there with the gun in his hand, the security guard fired in self-defense.

As for the security guard, he'd heard the shots when the lights went out, running to the sound of the screams when they came back on. He looked pretty nervous to me as he told his story, dabbing at his brow and wiping at the back of his neck with his handkerchief. "I never shot anybody before. Can't we get the paramedics here? Maybe he isn't really dead."

"Relax," the detective had said. "He's dead, and it was a righteous shoot."

A powder-burned napkin was found on the floor near the bodies. The detective theorized that Samuels had used the napkin to conceal the revolver when he came into the room. The lights going out, evidently a power surge of some kind, gave him the perfect opportunity to commit murder. But the lights had come back on before he could get rid of the gun. Reginald Aldridge was a great man, he would be missed, case closed.

I didn't have to be Danny Doggett to know the detective's line of reasoning left a lot of questions unanswered. But high-profile murders demand a quick resolution. The sisters accepted the detective's theory, and the law, for sure, would be happy to have the case all wrapped up. I still had the five thousand dollars Aldridge had given me, unearned, of course, but I wasn't about to give it back. Thus, I kept my mouth shut.

I didn't get an invitation to the funeral; I caught bits and pieces of it on the news. I guess I could've gone if I'd really wanted to. I

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had a bunch of reporters after me the first day or two. It felt good constantly getting my picture snapped again, but I gave them the same line of bull the detective had given out.

Yet, there had been something bothering me, something that had gotten lost at first between the gunshots and the screaming, something that just wouldn't go away. In the dark, the light airy breeze that accompanied the person who brushed past me held a hint of musk.

We're having the world premiere of *Danger for Danny Doggett* at the Century Orleans, one of the newer state-of-the-art movie theaters here in Vegas. Last summer's made-for-TV movie, *The Return of Danny Doggett,* made a shambles out of the Nielsen ratings and had three studios vying for a big-budget movie deal.

Jessica footed the bill for the TV movie and has some big bucks invested in the movie as well. We'd come to an agreement about a week after the funeral, after things had quieted down a bit. She'd passed by me that night on her way to pumping a couple of bullets into her old man. The scent of her perfume had been in my nostrils all the time, but too many other things were going on for me to lock onto it.

"Why?" I'd asked. We'd met at a back booth in a cozy little bar on Rainbow just off Charleston.

"I could say it was payback for what he did to my mother. He was operating the boat when the accident that killed her occurred. I always thought he'd done it on purpose. They used to argue an awful lot. I could also blame it on his constant interference in my life. In all of our lives, for that matter." She'd paused. "But I guess, mainly, I just got tired of waiting for him to die." Then she'd proceeded to tell me everything.

It had been her plan, but she hadn't acted alone. She'd stayed by the bar, where she had the gun and a beeper hiding, waiting for the right moment. When Samuels came in to announce dinner was ready, she beeped her accomplice to hit the lights, fixing in her mind's eye where her father was standing. In the dark she had rushed to him, fired, then dropped the gun to the floor, along with the napkin she'd used to prevent leaving her fingerprints. Her accomplice, Louis, the security guard, had given her ten seconds after he heard the gunshots before turning the lights back on and rushing into the room with his gun drawn. She'd planned all along to blame Samuels; it had been his gun she'd used, slipping it out of his room. His actually picking the gun up was a bonus she hadn't expected, and Louis had acted accordingly from there.

"I don't get it," I'd said, puzzled. "Why are you telling me all this so easily?"

She'd shrugged, smiled across the table at me. "Why not?

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They're just details. You're on to me anyway, otherwise you wouldn't have gotten me out here. What gave me away?"

"Your perfume, when you passed by me in the dark."

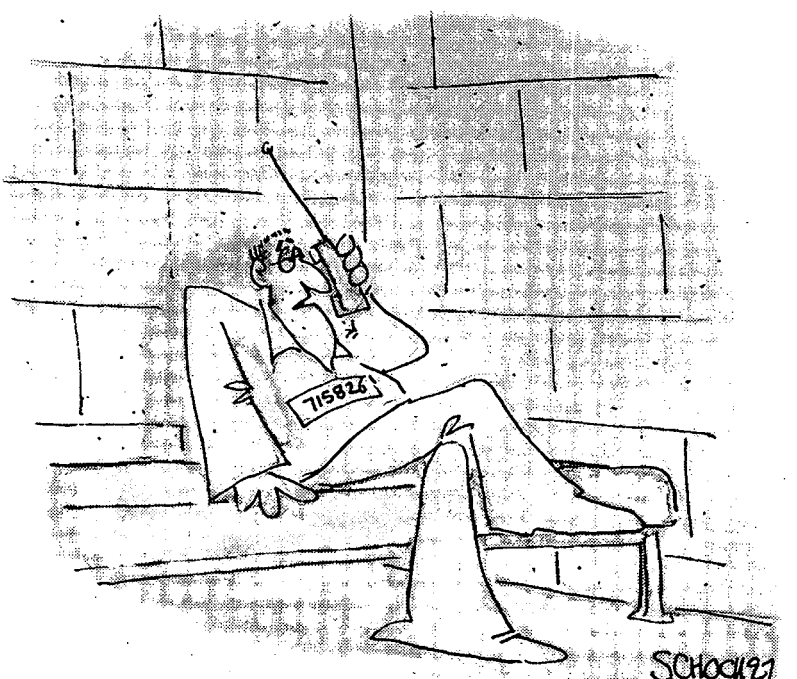
She smiled again. "It was a present from my father, a new fragrance one of his companies is coming out with." She'd taken a sip of her drink. "Now what? You certainly don't intend to turn me over to the police. So, what do you want, Mr. Jarvis?"

I had an answer all prepared. "I'd like to get Danny Doggett back on TV," I'd told her, and the rest had kind of snowballed from there.

There was a knock on the door and Louis stuck his head in. "The limo's downstairs waiting for us, Todd." He and Jessica had flown in this morning, interrupting their month-long honeymoon to catch the premiere.

"Be right there," I said, taking a last look at myself in the mirror: hair in place, tie straight, tuxedo unwrinkled. Bring on the paparazzi.

Okay, okay, so I'll admit at times I'm not too proud of what I see looking back at me. But I go back to the conversation I had with Aldridge when he gave me the five thousand dollars. He'd rattled on about a private eye's code of ethics. Once your word was given and all that kind of crap. If I were that private eye, I wouldn't have stopped until Jessica and Louis were behind bars. That was all well and good. But, as I tried to tell him then, I'm Todd Jarvis. I'm only an actor. ●



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I Think I Will Not Hang Myself Today

by Bill Pronzini

The leaves on the trees were dying.

She had noted that before, of course; neither her mind nor her powers of observation had been eroded by the passing years. But this morning, seen from her bedroom window, it seemed somehow a sudden thing, as if the maples and Japanese elms had changed color overnight, from bright green to red and brittle gold. Just yesterday it had been summer, now all at once it was autumn.

John had been taken from her on an October afternoon. It would be fitting if autumn were her time, too.

Perhaps today, she thought. Why not today?

Bill Pronzini seems to grow with every book, every story. Thirty years as a published fiction writer and some fifty books in print have not caused him to rest on his laurels or reach for a formula. Each of Mr. Pronzini's stories and books surprises us with something new in either style or content. The following story, which anatomizes a murder with only a sliver of action, is a more reflective tale than any we've seen from him before.

For a while longer, Miranda stood looking out at the cold morning, the sky more gray than blue. Wind rattled the frail leaves, now and then tore one loose and swirled it to the ground. Even from a distance, the maple leaves resembled withered hands, their veins and skeletal bone structure clearly visible. The wind, blowing from east to west, sent the fallen ones skittering across the lawn and its bordering flower beds, piled them in heaps along the wall of the old barn.

Looking at the barn this morning filled her with sadness. Once, when John was alive, the skirling whine of his power saws and the fine, fresh smells of sawdust and wood stain and lemon oil

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made the barn seem alive, as sturdy and indestructible as the beautiful furniture that came from his workshop. Now it was a sagging shell, a lonely place of drafts and shadows and ghosts, its high center beam like the crosspiece of a gallows.

So little left, she thought as she turned from the window. John gone these many years. Moira gone—no family left at all. Lord Byron gone six months, and as much as she missed the little Sealyham's companionship, she hadn't the heart to replace him with another pet. Gone, too, were most of her friends. And the pleasures of teaching grammar and classic English literature, the satisfaction that came from helping to shape young minds. ("We're sorry, Mrs. Halliday, but you know the mandatory retirement age in our district is sixty-five.") For a time there had been a few students to privately tutor, but none had come since last spring. County library cutbacks had ended her volunteer work at the local branch. The arthritis made it all but impossible for her to continue her sewing projects for homeless children. Even Mrs. Boyer in the next block had found someone younger and stronger to babysit her two preschoolers.

The loneliness had been endurable when she was needed, really needed. Being able to help others had given some meaning and purpose to her life. Now, though, she had become the needy one, requiring help with the cleaning, the yardwork, her weekly grocery shopping. All too soon, she would no longer be able to drive her car, and then she would be housebound, totally dependent on others. If that happened . . .

No, she thought, it mustn't. I'm sorry, John, but it mustn't.

She thought again of the old barn, his workshop, the long, high rafter beam. When it had become clear and irrefutable what she must one day do, there had never been any question as to the method. Mr. Gilbert Chesterton had seen to that. She had bought the rope that very day, and it was still out there waiting. She would have to stand on a ladder in order to loop it around the beam—not an easy task, even though the knot had long ago been tied. But she would manage. She had always managed, hadn't she? Supremely capable, John had called her. That, and the most determined woman he had ever known; once her mind was made up, nothing would change it. Yes, and the end would be quick and she would not suffer. No one should ever have to suffer when the time came.

Chesterton's lines ran through her mind again:

> The strangest whim has seized me. . . . After all
> I think I will not hang myself today.

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She had first come across "A Ballade of Suicide," one of his minor works, when she was a girl, and there had been something so haunting in those three lines that she had never forgotten them. One day, she would alter the last of the lines by deleting the word "not." This day, perhaps . . .

Miranda bathed and dressed and brushed her hair, which she kept short and wavy in the fashion John had liked. Satisfied with her appearance, she made her way downstairs and fixed a somewhat larger breakfast than usual—a soft-boiled egg to go with her habitual tea and toast. Then she washed the dishes—her hands were not paining too badly this morning—and entered the living room.

John had built every stick of furniture in there, of cherry wood and walnut. Tables, chairs, sofa and loveseat, sideboard, the tall cabinet that contained his collection of rifles and handguns. (She hated guns, but she had been unable to bring herself to rid the house of anything that had belonged to him.) Handcrafted furniture had been both his vocation and his hobby. An artist with wood, John Halliday. Everyone said so. She had loved to watch him work, to help him in his shop and to learn from him some of the finer points of his craft.

The photograph of John in his Navy uniform was centered on the fireplace mantel. She picked it up, looked at it until his lean, dark face began to blur, then replaced it. She dried her eyes and peered at the other framed photos that flanked his.

Mother, so slender and fragile, the black velvet-banded cameo she'd always worn hiding the grease burn on her throat. Father in cap and gown at one of his college graduation ceremonies, looking as young as one of his students. Moira and herself at ages four and seven, all dressed up for some occasion or other, and wasn't it odd how much prettier she had been as a child, when it was Moira who had grown into such a beautiful woman? Uncle Leon, his mouth full of the foul pipe he favored, and Aunt Gwen as round and white as the Pillsbury Doughboy. Gone, all gone. Dust. Sweet-sad memories and scattered specks of dust.

Miranda moved to the bookcases on the near side of the fireplace. Her domain; John had never been much of a reader, despite her best efforts. Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Shakespeare, Chaucer. Scott, Dickens, Hawthorne, the Bronte sisters, Stevenson. Browning and Byron and Eliot and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Nearly a dozen volumes of fiction and nonfiction by Chesterton, always her favorite. Oscar Wilde, so amusing and ironic—

The phone was ringing.

She may have heard the first ring, or the bell may have sounded two or three times before she grew aware of it; she wasn't quite sure. She went to answer it.

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"Miranda, dear, how are you?"

"Oh, hello, Patrice."

"You sound a bit melancholy this morning. Is everything all right?"

"Yes. You mustn't worry about me."

"But I do. You know I do."

Miranda knew it all too well. Patrice was one of her oldest friends, but their closeness was neither deep nor confiding. Patrice's life had been one long, smooth sail, empty of tragedy of any kind; she had never needed anyone outside her immediate family. And ever since Miranda's own tragic loss, Patrice's friendship and concern had been tinged with thinly concealed pity.

"I called to invite you to lunch tomorrow," Patrice said. "You need to get out more, and lunch at the Shady Grove Inn is just the ticket. My treat."

"That's good of you, but I don't believe I'll be able to accept."

"Other plans, dear?"

"I . . . may not be here tomorrow."

"Oh? Going away somewhere?"

"Possibly. It's not quite certain yet."

"May I ask where and with whom?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Of course, I understand. But talking about something in advance really doesn't prevent it from happening, you know."

"It can," Miranda said. "Sometimes it can."

"Well, you must tell me all about it afterward."

"It won't be a secret, Patrice. I can promise you that."

They talked a few minutes longer. Or rather, Patrice talked, mostly about her grandchildren. Miranda only half listened. It seemed quite cold in the house now, despite the fact that she had turned up the heat when she came downstairs. Imagination? No, she could hear the wind in the eaves, gusting more strongly than before, and when that happened the house always felt drafty.

When Patrice finally said goodbye, Miranda returned to the living room and put on the gas-log flame in the fireplace. She sat in front of it with a copy of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* open on her lap and tried to read. She couldn't seem to concentrate. I wish I had something else to do, she thought, something useful or important.

Well, she thought then, there is something, isn't there? Out in the barn?

But she was not ready to go out there yet. Not just yet. She picked up Wilde and tried again to focus on his words.

She was dozing when the doorbell rang. Dreaming about something pleasant, something to do with John and their honeymoon in the Caribbean, but the jarring sound of the bell drove it away.

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A visitor? She so seldom had visitors these days. The prospect hurried her steps to the door.

But it wasn't a visitor; it was Dwayne, the mailman, on the porch outside. "Morning, Miz Halliday," he said. "More mail than usual today so I thought I'd bring it up, save you the trouble."

"That was good of you, Dwayne."

"Catalogues, mostly. Not even the end of October and already we got piles of Christmas catalogues. Seems like they start sending 'em out earlier every year."

"Yes, it does."

He handed over the thick stack, being cautious about it because he knew of her arthritis. "You going out today, Miz Halliday?"

"I may, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's pretty cold out. Wind's got ice in it, first breath of winter. Real pneumonia weather. Better bundle up warm if you do go out."

"I will, thank you."

He wished her a good morning and left her alone again.

Miranda sifted through her mail. No personal letters, of course. Just two bills and three solicitations, one of the solicitations addressed to "Maranda Holiday." She laid the bills, unopened, on the kitchen table, put the solicitations in the trash and the catalogues in the recycle box.

Except for the wind, the house was very quiet.

And still unwarm.

And so empty.

In her sewing room, she removed the letter—three pages, carefully folded—from the bottom drawer of her desk. She had written it quite a long time ago, but she could have quoted it verbatim. The wind gusted noisily as she started out with it, rattling shingles and shutters, and she remembered what Dwayne had said about bundling up warm. The front hall closet yielded her heaviest wool coat and a pair of fleece-lined gloves. She had the coat over her shoulders, the letter tucked into one of the pockets, when the phone rang again.

"Mrs. Halliday? This is Sally Boyer?"

"Yes, Mrs. Boyer."

"I wonder if I could ask a big favor? I know it's short notice and I haven't been in touch in a while, but if you could help us out I'd really appreciate it?" Mrs. Boyer was one of those individuals who turn statements into questions by a rising interrogative inflection on the last few words of a sentence. More than once Miranda had been tempted to help her correct this irritating habit, but it would have been impolite to bring it up herself.

"What is the favor?"

"Could you babysit for us tonight? My husband has a business

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dinner, a client and his wife from Los Angeles who showed up without any advance warning? Well, he thinks it's important for me to join them and our regular sitter has band practice tonight and so I thought you . . .?"

"I'm afraid I have another commitment," Miranda said firmly.

"You do? You couldn't possibly break it?"

"I don't see how I can, now."

"But I thought you, of all people . . . I mean . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Boyer, I understand. And I'm sorry."

"I don't know who else to call," Mrs. Boyer said. "Can you think of anyone? You must know someone, some other elder . . . some other person?"

"I don't know anyone," Miranda said. "No one at all."

She said goodbye and replaced the receiver. She buttoned her coat, worked her gnarled fingers into the gloves, then crossed the rear porch and stepped outside.

The wind was blustery and very cold, but she didn't hurry. It would not do to hurry at a time like this. She walked at a steady, measured pace across the leaf-strewn yard to the barn.

The front half was mostly a dusty catchall storage area, as it had been when John was alive. On the right side was a cleared section just large enough for her car; the remaining floor space was packed with trunks, boxes, discarded appliances, gardening equipment, and the like. Some of the cartons had been there for so long Miranda no longer had any idea what they contained. She made her way along the passenger side of the car to the doorway in the center partition; opened it and passed through into John's workshop.

His last few woodworking projects, finished and unfinished, were bulky mounds under the dustcloths she had placed over them. His workbench, lathe, table saws, and such were also shrouded. The bench was where the coiled rope lay, but Miranda did not go in that direction. Nor did she glance up at the ceiling beam in the shadows above.

At the workshop's far end, more shadows crowded the alcove where John had kept his cot and tiny refrigerator. On those long-ago summer nights when he had been deep into one of his projects, he had slept out here to avoid disturbing her. Now there was nothing inside the alcove, only the bare wood floor over packed earth.

Miranda knelt and raised the cunningly hidden hinged section. Underneath, the flowers she had placed there last week were already withered and crumbling, dust and petals scattered across the pair of old graves.

So many years since she'd found John and Moira together here that night. So many years since the strangest whim had seized

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her and she'd done what she felt she must—shot them both with one of John's handguns, quickly and efficiently, for no one should have to suffer when the time came. So many years since she had, in her supremely capable fashion, dug for each of them a final resting place and then, using the woodworking skills John had taught her, rebuilt the flooring to cover the graves.

No one had ever suspected. John Halliday had run off with his wife's beautiful younger sister—that was what everyone believed. Such a terrible tragedy for poor Miranda, they all said. But no one except her could know how terrible it really was to be left all alone with nobody to love except a little dog and fewer and fewer and fewer ways in which to atone for her sin.

It would be quite a shock when the citizens of Shady Grove learned the truth. And learn it they must; she had kept the secret too long and she could not carry it with her to her own grave—in the words of the poet Andrew Marvell, that "fine and private place." She had explained everything in the three-page letter; it would be her final act of atonement.

John and Moira knew all about the rope and the letter. Over and over she had told them that one day she must again do what she felt was necessary. Yet they were so reluctant to let her go. She could feel their reluctance now. Selfish. Even in death, they cared only for themselves.

"John," she said, "this is the proper day. Can't you understand how I feel?"

The wind mourned outside.

"Moira? We've hurt each other enough. Isn't it time we were together again?"

The last of the flowers suddenly trembled and broke apart. The earth seemed to tremble, too, as if there were stirrings within. It was only a draft caused by the wind, she knew it could be nothing else, yet it was as if they had caused it. As if they were beseeching and mocking her, saying quite clearly: "You can't leave us, Miranda. Who will tend to us once you're gone? Who will bring flowers and keep the weeds from growing up around us?

"*We* need you, Miranda. You know that, don't you?"

She did not argue; it never did any good to argue. She sighed and got slowly to her feet. "After all," she said, "I think I will not hang myself today."

She lowered the hinged section, thinking that she must buy fresh flowers to replace the withered ones because it was autumn and there were none left in the garden. But before she called the florist, she would ring up Mrs. Boyer and tell her she would be able to babysit tonight after all. ●

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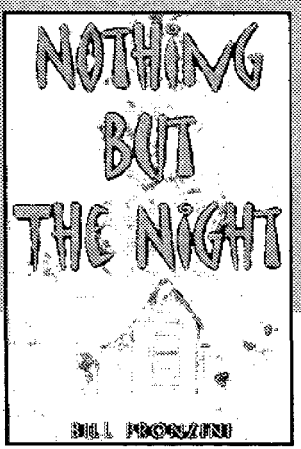
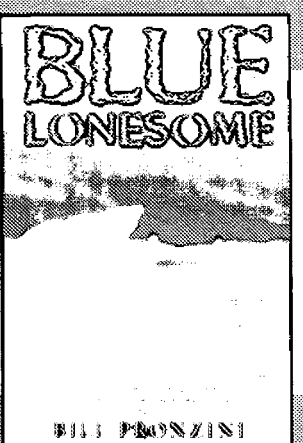
CRAVING MORE Pronzini?



"Pronzini mixes self-destructive and psychotic behavior in a cocktail that bites from the first sip to the last."
—San Jose Mercury News



"A superbly entertaining thriller."
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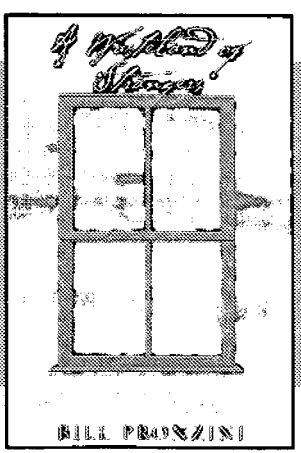

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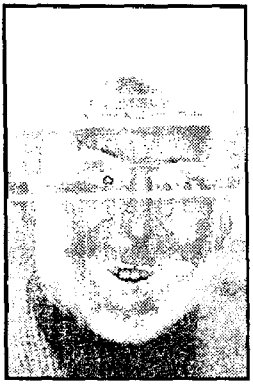
1999 Readers Award



Michael A. Kahn

Clark Howard

Minette Walters

One of the great storytellers of our time, Clark Howard has captured first place for the fifth time with "The Global Man" (December, 1999), a tale of international intrigue that blends romance, large-scale dramatic action, and edge-of-your-seat suspense. Though the author is a past winner of the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for his short fiction, the *EQMM* Readers Award is the prize he values most, since it comes from a dedicated audience of readers and fans. Clark Howard's achievements span the entire crime field, from Edgar-nominated true-crime books and mystery novels to short stories in both the mystery and western genres. Recently most of his writing time has been devoted to the short story, his first and enduring love as an author.

The very first Readers Award went to Clark Howard in 1985. To have retained a preeminent place in readers' esteem for so many years is a remarkable accomplishment. We salute Mr. Howard for working, always, at the top of his form; *EQMM* would have been the poorer these many years without him. *EQMM* has several new Clark Howard stories coming up later in the year; and you won't want to miss his western suspense tale, "The Spirit Birds," on page 112 of this issue.

St. Louis attorney Michael A. Kahn debuted as a fiction writer only six years ago, when his novel *Firm Ambitions* (1994) was published by Dutton. The book featured savvy St. Louis trial lawyer Rachel Gold, whom *Bookends* magazine immediately hailed as "a heroine for the '90s." While still prac-

Photo credits: Howard by Judith Howard; Kahn by Caroline M.H. Kraus; Walters by Isolde Ohlbaum

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ticing law, the new author managed to pen two more books in the series in 1995 and 1996. Rachel Gold's next appearance was in the short story readers voted second in this year's competition, "The Bread of Affliction" (Sept/Oct '99). This splendid story combines all the elements of great mystery writing: a genuine puzzle solved by means of fairly revealed clues; unforgettable characterization; and skillful use of information that, while not arcane, is little enough known to give the story an extra level of interest.

Although Michael A. Kahn had previously written nonfiction feature articles for *Chicago Magazine,* his fiction-writing career began on a dare from his wife, who decided to challenge him on his oft-stated belief that he could write a better thriller than most of those he was picking up at airport newsstands. With the publication of his fourth book, *Bearing Witness,* coming up in September of 2000, we think the author has fairly proved his point—*EQMM* readers appear to think so! Our congratulations to a writer we'll be watching carefully over the next decade.

Third place this year goes to renowned British author Minette Walters, celebrated worldwide for her sinister suspense novels, but previously not a writer of short stories at all. *EQMM* published the very first Walters short story, "The Tinder Box," in December of 1999 and our readers have come back with a vote we hope will tell the author that the short story is a form she oughtn't to neglect, however great the demands of her book publishers.

Minette Walters appeared on the mystery scene little more than eight years ago, with the publication of her first crime novel, *The Ice House.* The several popular novels that followed earned her an Edgar Allan Poe Award and a Gold Dagger, and have been translated into thirty-two languages. Many readers will have seen the television adaptation of Minette Walters's book *The Sculptress* on PBS. Like most authors, Minette Walters appears to revisit certain themes in her fiction; in"The Tinder Box," as in some of her longer work, she probes the psychology of social outcasts. Hearty congratulations to her on a job well done!

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . ."Triangle" by Jeffery Deaver (3/99)
Fifth . . . ."An Imperfect Gift" by Kate Wilhelm (8/99)
Sixth . . . "The Reluctant Op" by Barbara Paul (9-10/99)
Seventh ."But the Corpse Can't Laugh" by Mary Jane Maffini (4/99)
Eighth . ."The Ice Shelf" by Clark Howard (9-10/99)
Ninth . . ."The War That Never Was" by Edward D. Hoch (12/99)
Tenth . . ."Copy Cat" by David Dean (7/99)

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Art by Jayson Eckhardt

There Was a Balm in Gilead

by Stefanie Matteson

"Stones have been known to move and trees to speak."
—William Shakespeare

Rachel MacPherson dreamed of the little girl again that night. The little girl with the golden ringlets, dressed in the batiste sailor dress and the straw boater, like a girl in a Renoir portrait. She was playing in the sun-dappled grass under the tree, as she always was in Rachel's dreams. This time she was playing with the leaves: picking them up and tossing them into the air, laughing as they floated to the ground. Then she leaned over and picked one up. She turned it in her tiny fingers. It was large and heart-shaped, a rich dark green on top and a pale silvery-gray underneath. Holding it up, she studied the delicate silhouette of the veins. Then she drifted forward, her white,

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high-buttoned leather shoes hovering above the grass, until she was directly in front of Rachel. She held the inverted leaf by its delicate, slightly curved stalk, so that it concealed the lower part of her face like a purdah. She raised her eyes. They were navy blue, fringed with gold. She moved the leaf closer until Rachel could see not only the pattern of the major veins, but also the mosaic of smaller ones. She leaned forward, peering into Rachel's mind. Then she spoke: "This is my heart," she said in the hoarse croak of an old woman.

That was when Rachel woke up.

Stefanie Matteson is the author of the Charlotte Graham mystery series, whose most recent entry at novel length is *Murder Under the Palms* (St. Martin's Press). The author's debut for *EQMM* kicks off a new series, introducing Chinese-American landscape architect Andrew Wei in a tale that involves arboricide. Ms. Matteson has already completed a new novel featuring her distinctive sleuth.

Rachel knew who the girl was. She was Dora Howell, who had moved into the turreted Victorian on the Balmville Road as a newlywed in 1920 and lived there for sixty-six years, until her family finally convinced her that she was too frail to go on living in the big old house alone. She sold the house to the MacPhersons and moved into a senior citizens' home. Rachel also knew the tree. It was the Balm of Gilead that stood across the road. The central New Jersey hamlet of Balmville was named for it. She saw it from her bedroom window, also from the steps of her front porch and in her rearview mirror every time she backed out of her driveway. For four years, it had presided over her life and that of her family with wisdom and dignity. She called it the "she-tree," for trees—special trees anyway—seemed to her to be sexed, and there was no doubt in her mind that the Balm of Gilead was female.

A brass plaque affixed to the trunk said the tree had been standing there since 1699, had a girth of twenty-five feet, five inches, and had been designated a "National Champion," which meant it was the largest of its kind in the country. The plaque also said that the tree was maintained in his memory by the family of Commander James B. Howell, U. S. N. (1869-1944), who was described as a "lover of frozen places." Next to the tree stood a metal rod the size of a telephone pole to which a grid of steel cables was attached to support the limbs. Encircling the trunk was a stone wall that had been erected by the historical society after the tree was rammed by a drunken driver.

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Rachel even knew what the dream was saying. Each of her dreams about Dora Howell had shed further light on the girl's message, until she had finally been able to assemble the pieces of the puzzle into a whole.

She stood now in front of the tree on a beautiful June morning trying to explain to a stranger what it meant to her. He was a landscape architect by the name of Andrew Wei who was said to be the local expert on trees. Noticing that the tree didn't look healthy, he had stopped to inquire what was being done to care for it. Curiosity had also no doubt played a part, since the trunk was festooned with votive offerings to its health.

There was no doubt the tree was sick, Rachel told him. The symptoms had appeared the previous spring. At first, she had thought the tree was just being slow to leaf out, which was unusual in itself, since its leaves were usually among the first to appear, perfuming the air with their sweet, balsamic scent. But when the leaves finally had appeared, they immediately started to shrivel up. Later in the season, the tree put forth new growth, but only on two of the three main limbs. The third was dead.

Until the death of this limb, the tree had been distinguished by its unusual form: a narrow crown with three thick limbs that reached upward from the stout, hoary trunk. Rachel had always thought of them as two arms and a head, she told Wei. A pale, flat scar where a limb had once been removed shone at the base of the center limb like a face. The tree surgeons had amputated the dead arm the previous summer and the second arm now appeared to be dead as well. Though it was late spring, this limb still bore no leaves, despite fertilization, despite spraying for woolly aphids and bark beetles, despite Rachel's prayers and ritual offerings and those of her friends and neighbors. Only the main limb survived, and even its branches appeared to be dying back. But whether it was old age or disease, no one had thus far had been able to determine.

Maybe Andrew Wei would know, Rachel thought. Unlike the tree surgeons, he was taking the time to get to know the patient. As she spoke, he had run his fingers over the ridges in the coarse, deeply furrowed bark; he had studied the ground under the canopy; he had examined the leaves; he had gazed up at the dead limb and at the one that was still alive. He had listened patiently to Rachel's account of her relationship with the tree: how she had never felt the kinship with anything in nature that she felt with this tree, and how she had taken over its care from the aging members of the Howell family, who had maintained it for years even though it stood on land belonging to a local apple grower.

He had even seemed to understand the concept that one *could* have a personal relationship with a tree, that the spirit of the

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tree—the tree deva, as she called it—was as alive to her as the spirit of a human being.

Now she was relating the history of the tree. Or rather, that of the tree's relationship with the people around it.

"It was a dream," she said. "That's why Dora Hamilton—Hamilton was Dora's married name—bought the house. Because of a dream she'd had when she was eight. She told me about it just after we moved in. By then she was in her late eighties and living in a senior citizens' home." She shifted her attention from the tree to her visitor. "Did you know her father was an arctic explorer?"

Wei shook his head, clearly wondering what this had to do with Dora Hamilton's dream and what, in turn, the dream had to do with the ailing Balm of Gilead.

"He was a Navy engineer who made his mark as an arctic surveyor. But he was most famous for an expedition that was financed by the widow of Horace Griswold to search for the remains of the Griswold Party, which had been sent by the National Geographic Society to conquer the North Pole. Fifty-two men disappeared without a trace. Maybe you've heard an account of it," she said, looking inquiringly at him. "It's considered the greatest tragedy in the history of arctic exploration."

"I have," Wei replied. "But I didn't know Dora Hamilton's father played a part.".

Rachel noticed that Wei's eyes had an Asiatic cast and she wondered if he was part Chinese. His name certainly was. He was a handsome man, but she had long ago given up on physical appearance as an indicator of anything. Instead, she judged a person by the quality of their energy, and she liked his: steady and calm, with a sense of inner light and space. She went on: "Griswold's steamer was last seen near Ellesmere Island, from which Peary later set off for the pole. The previous search expeditions had all been sent in from the west on the theory that if Griswold's steamer had been locked in the pack ice, it would have been carried out to the Beaufort Sea."

Rachel continued with the oft-told story: "But Mrs. Griswold was convinced that the party's remains would be found to the south. And so she financed Howell's expedition: five Americans, forty-nine Inuit, and two hundred forty-six dogs. They were to follow the Back River through the Northwest Territories and then head northward through the arctic archipelago. As you can imagine, the expedition was the subject of much discussion in the Howell household," she continued. "Just before they departed in the spring of nineteen-oh-four, Dora had a dream about it that she reported to her father."

"This was the dream that prompted her to buy the house?"

"Yes," Rachel replied. "The dream was of a frozen arctic waste.

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She described it as being blue-white and suffused with a pale, salmon-colored light, which she took to be that of the arctic twilight, which lingers all night at such northerly latitudes. In the middle of this waste floated an island of tall, stately trees with dark green leaves whose silver undersides shimmered in the breeze. In the whisper of the leaves, she heard a message." She turned to look at him, pausing with the storyteller's gift for heightening suspense. "The message was that the expedition would find the remains of the Griswold Party on a tree-studded island at the mouth of a frozen river."

As if to confirm the veracity of the story, a light breeze ruffled the leaves overhead, exposing their silvery undersides and releasing a small cloud of cottony seedpods.

"And did they?" asked Wei.

She nodded grimly. "On a small island at the mouth of the Back River. They had drifted south, just as Mrs. Griswold had said. At first, Howell thought the island was a Fata Morgana: an illusion inspired by his daughter's dream. But it really *was* an island, and it was exactly as Dora had described it. The Griswold Party had apparently chosen the site because of the Balm of Gilead trees, which held the promise of shelter, fuel, and game. Howell found what was left of them under the trees. From the mutilated state of the corpses and the contents of the cooking vessels, it was obvious that the last of the survivors had been driven to cannibalism." She waved a dismissive forearm, which was tattooed in an artistic design and bore half a dozen bangle bracelets. "But that's another story." She smiled. "And we're not done with this one yet."

"I thought there were no trees above the timber line," Wei commented.

"That's what I thought, too, but Dora told me there are sometimes groves of Balm of Gilead in the sheltered coves and valleys. And of course, the Balm of Gilead is the first tree to appear in significant numbers below the timber line." She looked up at the leaves of the ancient tree, which fluttered in the wind overhead. "'A bam tree' is what she said her father called it—it's a lumberman's term, a corruption of balm. Anyway, before he set out, Howell told Mrs. Griswold about his daughter's dream and she in turn told the press, which was obsessed with the fate of the Griswold Party. When Dora's prognostication turned out to be right, the press went to town over it. Dora told them that the leaves of the trees in her dream had talked to her, just as the ice talks to the Inuits, and they had a field day with the talking-leaves angle.

"Howell made seven more expeditions to the Canadian Arctic, and he told Dora that after the Griswold search expedition, he never saw a grove of bams without being overcome with emotion. Occasionally he would encounter an isolated grove north of the

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timber line, but it was seeing them rising from the frozen tundra on his return trip that most affected him. They were the first sign that he had made it back safely, that he had reached what he called the 'south of sixty.'"

"The sixtieth parallel?" Wei inquired.

Rachel nodded. "For that reason, the Balm of Gilead tree held a special place in his heart. Dora told me that he loved the hymn, 'There Is a Balm in Gilead.' And so did she." She began to sing the haunting melody in a slow, easy alto: "*'There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole . . .'*"

Wei joined in on the second stanza: "*'There is a balm in Gilead to heal a sin-sick soul.'* It's one of my favorites too," he added.

They had crossed the road and were headed up the MacPhersons' driveway, in which Wei's car was parked.

Pausing in the driveway, Rachel looked up at the house. "Dora and her husband bought the house because of the tree. When she saw it, she knew that this was where she would spend the rest of her days. And so she did, if you don't count her time in the senior citizens' home and, more recently, in the hospital."

At the head of the driveway, she turned to survey her domain. The tree was silhouetted against a background of rolling hills cloaked with apple orchards. Next to the tree was an old cemetery, its tilted gravestones blackened with age, and next to the cemetery, a country church. Beyond the church was the cluster of houses that made up the hamlet of Balmville. She hoped she would be lucky enough to spend the rest of her days in as lovely a place.

She turned back to face her visitor, her tattooed forearm resting on the outslung hip of her Indian-cotton skirt, her wide hazel eyes alert, challenging.

"So what do you think's wrong with it?" she asked.

Andrew Wei had known the Balmville tree since he was a child. The Balmville Road was a shortcut his parents often took on their trips out from New York City to visit his grandparents at their estate, Five Willows. It was from his grandfather that Andrew had inherited his love of trees. Grandfather Ward had lavished his considerable fortune on collecting new varieties of trees from the Far East. Though an amateur, he was considered the foremost plant hunter of his day, and the grounds of Five Willows held over 5,000 varieties of trees. Wei now lived and practiced landscape architecture at Five Willows. But as often as he had passed the Balmville tree, he had never heard its story. It was a story that he found strangely moving, perhaps because his grandfather had also been an adventurer. He was also intrigued by the notion of little Dora listening to the leaves. Sometimes he felt as if they were talking to him, too.

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Mostly he was fascinated by the woman who stood so implacably before him, demanding answers. She was tall, with broad shoulders and an ample bosom. Thick black hair, now streaked with gray, cascaded over her tanned shoulders. She was stately, like the tree. She leaned against the rear bumper of her car, a battered Volvo whose bumper stickers read, "I'd Rather be Drumming," "Respect the Earth and All Living Creatures," and "Believe in God—*She* Will Help You." They were looking out at the one-armed tree, whose trunk was crisscrossed with Christmas lights and festooned with trinkets, artworks, and found objects. Though he'd always felt a kinship with trees, Wei considered this an affinity that was not for public acknowledgment, much less expression. That what he considered a private pleasure should be so openly celebrated by this woman was a revelatory concept. She had described herself as an artist; she gave lessons in the carriage barn behind the house. He would have liked to see her work.

But she had been wrong about the tree. Or rather, Dora Hamilton had been wrong. And he told her that now: "It's a wonderful story, but it's not a bam tree."

"It's not?" Rachel said, her eyes widening. They had curious upturned lines at the corners, which made her look surprised even when she wasn't.

"It's a close relative. The southern range of Dora's bam tree is to the north of here. This is a hybrid. The leaf's a little bigger, more heart-shaped. And it's grayer on the underside. I would guess that this tree was planted by the early settlers for the bees."

"The bees?"

"This was an apple-growing region," he explained. "Still is, though back then the apples were grown for applejack. Jersey lightning, it was called. The farmers kept bees to pollinate the orchards. The bees use the resin from the Balm of Gilead buds to patch the crevices in their hives; it's called bee propolis, or bee glue."

"The same stuff you buy at the health-food store for a sore throat?"

He nodded. "It's used in other home remedies too."

"I'd heard that you know a lot about trees. I guess that's right." She gazed out at the tree with newfound appreciation. Then she looked back at him. "But that doesn't change it, does it? The fact that it isn't a bam tree. Because bam tree or not, it's the reason Dora Hamilton bought the house. Stories are like that: They take on a life of their own, even if the details may not be quite accurate."

"Yes, they do," he concurred. But what he didn't say was that the story might change again, be given a new, more tragic ending. Because he suspected that the leaf he twirled in his hand came from a tree that had been poisoned.

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Accidentally or deliberately, he didn't know, Wei thought as he drove back to Five Willows. Perhaps by some chemical that had been applied to the road or to the neighboring orchards. But he doubted it. In an earlier era, maybe. But chemical applications were now strictly regulated, making accidental contamination unlikely. And the fines for dumping toxic waste were so steep that he doubted anyone would take the risk at the side of an inhabited road. But who would deliberately poison a tree? He'd occasionally heard of such cases. Apart from attention-seeking, which was the motive in the case of the Texas Treaty Oak, the most famous case he knew of, he could think of only a couple of reasons why someone might want to kill the Balmville tree. The first was its cottony seedpods. They were a nuisance, particularly as regarded swimming pools and air-conditioning units, and the MacPhersons' neighbor, he had noticed, had both. The surface of their pool was coated with the seedpods. It seemed a flimsy motive for the murder of a venerable tree, but flimsy motives seemed to be the rule these days.

But he suspected a far more plausible motive. He had noticed surveying stakes along the road. In this rapidly growing area, the appearance of such stakes was usually the first sign of a new housing development. He had the feeling that such was about to be the fate of the apple orchard on the hillside opposite the MacPhersons' home. Could the developer have poisoned the tree because it was an impediment to the development? He decided that some inquiries at the town hall were in order. But first he had to determine whether the tree was poisoned, and if so, with what.

When he got home, he called Tom Kane, a tree biologist at the University of Georgia, whose arcane specialty was tree forensics. Though Kane usually dealt with insects and microorganisms, his expertise also extended to poisons. It was Kane who had identified the herbicide used to poison the Texas Treaty Oak.

Kane asked him to send tissue samples, and after packing up what he had collected, Wei dropped the package off at the post office. Then he drove over to the town hall, which was located in a historic house on Main Street. Like many hamlets in the Somerset Hills, Balmville was not a distinct political entity, but a section of the town in which Wei resided. He was therefore acquainted with the planning officer, an amiable young man named Phil Guarino with warm brown eyes and a handlebar moustache.

It didn't take long to find out the answer to his question. The property was slated for a development called Apple Ridge Estates: forty-nine luxury homes on four-acre lots. Guarino showed him a promotional flyer: "Cross and Howard present Apple Ridge Estates," it read. "Quality homes with scenic views, incomparable design, and luxury features at no extra cost. Two Olympic-sized swimming pools,

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tennis courts, playgrounds, clubhouse. Starting at $825,000. This is the community that sets the standard for the area."

Reading the brochure, Wei felt a wave of dismay at the thought of another Cross and Howard development despoiling the landscape. Over the course of the last twenty years, their earth-moving equipment had gobbled up thousands of acres of central New Jersey farmland. The name was synonymous with mass housing for the upper end of the market; also for shoddy construction, cookie-cutter architecture, and shady business tactics.

Wei took a seat in the chair opposite Guarino. "I'm here about the Balm of Gilead tree on the Balmville Road," he announced. "Is there any reason that Cross and Howard might want it out of the way?"

"They can't cut it down," Guarino replied. "The Historic Sites Council won't allow it. The tree dates back to sixteen ninety-nine."

"What I mean is, if they were allowed, would they have a reason?"

"Definitely," Guarino replied. "They petitioned the Historic Sites Council to cut it down and the council issued a 'ruling of adverse effect,' which Cross and Howard challenged in court. They wanted to locate the entrance on the Balmville Road, which would have meant cutting the tree down because there are wetlands on one side and a cemetery on the other." He got up to retrieve the site plan from a filing cabinet.

Returning to his desk a moment later, he unrolled the plan and pointed to the place where the entrance had been located, directly in the path of the Balmville tree. "The Historic Sites Council ruled that the entrance had to be located on the county highway"—he pointed to a road entering from the east—"which they didn't want because it would be more expensive to build and because it wouldn't have the same aesthetic appeal."

"I see," said Wei as he studied the plan. He looked up at Guarino. "And what was the outcome of their court challenge?"

"They lost. The court upheld the Historic Sites Council's ruling and said that the entrance would have to be located on the county highway."

"But construction hasn't started."

"Not until early next year. Why do you want to know?" He sat back down in his swivel chair and gave Wei an appraising look.

"I had a conversation this morning with the woman who lives across the street. Her name is Rachel MacPherson. Do you know her?"

"Tattoos, nose ring, doesn't take no for an answer?"

Wei smiled. "That's her."

"She led the crusade against Cross and Howard. She's a force to be reckoned with: very persistent and very effective, despite the fact that she was David against their Goliath. They said she didn't want the entrance on the Balmville Road because it would be

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opposite her house, which I suppose was partly right. But she also cared about the tree. And she was right. There's no reason to cut down the tree when they can come in from the other side. Why were you talking with her?"

"The tree is dying."

Guarino's eyes turned serious.

"One of the three major limbs is already dead and another is badly diseased," Wei explained. He took out a file folder between whose Manila covers several leaves were pressed. He showed Guarino how the veins were alive, but the rest was brown and dry. "These are the symptoms of a toxic reaction."

Guarino sighed and ran his fingers through his curly black hair. "Are you saying that Cross and Howard is poisoning the tree?"

"Maybe. I don't know for sure that it *is* being poisoned. I've sent tissue samples out to a lab, but I won't have the results for a few days. I have two questions. The first is, do you think Cross and Howard would do such a thing? You know this outfit better than I do. The second is, do you think it would be worth it to them?"

Guarino put his feet up on his desk. "You're talking about a company that has a reputation for being unscrupulous, that's been sued on numerous occasions for shoddy workmanship. Are they capable of it? Sure. Would it be worth it to them? It was worth paying their lawyers a lot of money to challenge the Historic Sites Council's decision." He thought for a moment and then added, "Consider the downside risk. Even if they *were* convicted of poisoning the tree—and I should think such a crime would be extremely difficult to prove—what would the penalty be? I can't imagine the state's going to throw one of their biggest developers in the clink for arboricide."

Wei nodded in agreement and then smiled. "In my mind it's a crime worthy of a jail sentence, but not everyone feels as strongly about trees as I do," he commented. "Thanks, Phil," he added, rising to leave. "You've been a big help."

"You're welcome. Let me know what the outcome is."

After leaving Guarino's office, Wei drove back to see Rachel MacPherson. He couldn't believe that anyone would even think of cutting down a tree that was almost three centuries old—the largest of its species—much less go to court for the right to do so. Though Five Willows boasted no national champions, it did have two state champions—the largest Cornelian cherry and the largest hedge maple. Because they were smaller than the balm, even a large specimen wasn't that majestic, but he nevertheless might have been driven to homicide had anyone dared to poison them. His mind shifted to other cases of arboricide, the most egregious being the giant sequoia—the world's largest tree—that had

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been felled at the beginning of the century merely so that a slice of the gigantic trunk could be displayed to curious spectators. And for every such major offense, there were countless smaller ones, including those of Cross and Howard who, when they weren't plotting to cut down a historic tree, were bulldozing the forest and replanting the denuded home sites with ornamental trees that would never grow big enough to shade the house and that were destined to die anyway because the landscapers stuck them into a mound of mulch instead of bothering to dig a proper hole.

As he dwelled on these thoughts, he noticed that the needle of his speedometer was climbing. If he wasn't careful, he would get a ticket on account of a tree. His foot eased up on the accelerator. And then, as if seeking an antidote to these disturbing thoughts, his mind went wandering off in search of more pleasant territory and alighted on a stately grove of Balm of Gileads floating in the blue-white arctic waste, the silvery undersides of their leaves shimmering and rustling in the breeze.

He arrived ten minutes later to find Rachel tacking more votive objects to the tree. When he asked where they had come from, she told him that they'd been contributed by the students in that morning's class. "I spread objects out on a table and invited them to choose something," she explained. "Many of them were objects I had found. I wanted to use recycled things to symbolize new life." As she circled the tree, she explained the meaning of the objects. There were outgrown baby shoes from a neighbor's grandchild; tin can lids arranged in a spiral, a symbol of renewal; a rubber snake, another symbol of renewal, contributed by her son; and a grasshopper for the snake to eat. There were plastic milk-bottle caps, beaded necklaces, brightly colored lengths of ribbon and fabric, strings of bells, even a shiny compact disk. She explained how responsive her students had been to her feeling for the tree and how grateful she was for that. "They're calling themselves the dendrophiles," she said.

"The dendrophiles," Wei repeated with a smile. "I like that." Squatting down, he examined the lettering on an old sign that was nailed to the base of the trunk. He tried to decipher the faded words. "Wendell Willkie for President!" he finally exclaimed.

"It's from the carriage barn," Rachel said. "I encouraged them to use things that the tree would have been familiar with. This is also from the barn," she said, pointing to a 1939 license plate. "And this is a nineteen forty-six quarter that I dug up when I was planting bulbs. The idea was to contribute something that would have meaning either to the tree or to the person contributing it. That's why some of the things are so intimate. Like this," she said, running her fingers through the orange locks of a tattered rag

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doll. "This belonged to the daughter of one of my students. They're images from life. Or from the life of the tree. We're remembering the tree and we're reminding the tree to remember itself."

She stood back to admire the new decorations. "To be remembered," she said, speaking as much to herself as to him, "that's the balm, the healing part. The tree has given us its balm for three centuries and now we're giving it that balm back."

Wei thought the tree looked increasingly like something from another, more primitive culture: a totem from the Pacific Northwest, a voodoo ceremonial object, an ancient tree shrine. After a moment, he said: "I went to see Phil Guarino today. He said he knew you."

She looked over at him. "Did he refer to me as the lady with the nose ring who's a pain in the ass?" she asked with a merry glint in her eye.

Wei laughed. "He said you were very effective. 'A force to be reckoned with,' were his words. He told me about Cross and Howard's plans to locate the entrance to their development here and how they'd challenged the Historical Sites Council's ruling."

"And you think they're poisoning the tree?"

"I don't know. I don't even know *if* it's being poisoned." He told her about the symptoms of chemical poisoning and about sending the samples to Georgia.

"Cross and Howard was my first thought, of course," Rachel said. "But I didn't want to put the idea in your head. I preferred letting you come to your own conclusion."

"It's not a conclusion. It's a theory."

"Pardon me. Your own *theory.*"

"Actually, it's a theory without any basis in fact. Usually in cases like this you see holes drilled into the ground or into the trunk. But there's no evidence of drilling that I can detect, which means that the poisoner, if there is one, must have used a sophisticated herbicide. Let's backtrack for a minute. I noticed that the neighbors' pool is coated with seed fluff. Have they ever complained about it?"

"I'm sure they don't like it, but if you're implying that they poisoned the tree because it's a nuisance, the answer is no. They love the tree." She nodded at the trunk. "Those are their granddaughter's baby shoes. I liked your first theory better."

"Okay. Do you have any reason for thinking that Cross and Howard might have poisoned the tree, apart from it being in their financial interest? Have you seen any Cross and Howard trucks lurking suspiciously around the neighborhood, for instance?"

She smiled. "Since Cross and Howard came to town their trucks are coming and going all day long. But yes, there is a suspicious character. I haven't seen him lurking, but if I had to pick the most likely person to poison a tree, he would win hands down."

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"Who is he?"

"His name is Jim Fowler, and he's the project manager for Apple Ridge Estates. He was once convicted of bribing a building inspector, which is only one of several unsavory secrets I've unearthed from his past. He wasn't working for Cross and Howard then, but a leopard doesn't change his spots. He's in charge of their dirty-tricks department: intimidation, threats, misrepresentation. I can easily imagine a scenario in which the bosses offer him a bonus if the tree dies. But I don't know how you'd prove it."

"I don't either," Wei confessed. "Thanks for the tip. I'll look into it some more." He sounded more confident than he was. He hadn't the faintest idea where to begin. He turned his attention back to the tree. "And which is your offering?"

She looked at him to see if he was mocking her. Concluding that he was serious, she replied: "Well, I've made a few. The quarter that I dug up in the yard. And this."

It was a triangle of wood that had been painted with a stylized image of an eye.

"It's an evil eye. I made it to ward off evil influences, Jim Fowler among them." She pointed to another piece of wood on which a boat was painted. "Also this," she added. "It's a totem to carry the soul of the tree on its spirit journey. But if you're asking what I gave the tree *today,* I gave it that." She pointed to a medal that was nailed to the trunk.

It was a Medal of Merit awarded to Commander James B. Howell, U.S.N., by the National Geographic Society, commending him for service rendered in his exploration of the Canadian Arctic.

"When I went to visit Dora Hamilton in the hospital yesterday, I explained what we would be doing and asked if she had anything to contribute. That's when she gave me the medal. She said it was her most treasured possession."

Tom Kane called from Georgia with the test results two days later.

"You cited the fact that there wasn't any drilling as evidence for the theory that we must be dealing with a sophisticated toxin," said Kane. "Well, you were right about there not being any drilling, but for the wrong reason. We aren't dealing with a sophisticated toxin, but with one of the most simple."

"What is it?" asked Wei.

"Copper spikes."

One of the oldest ways of killing a tree, used by neighbor against neighbor for hundreds of years, Wei thought. "But why didn't I see any evidence of spiking?"

"Probably because whoever did it countersunk the spikes. On a tree as old as this, the bark would be so deeply furrowed that you

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wouldn't notice the entry holes. But now that you know they're there, you should be able to find them."

It wasn't hard to find the spikes. If they'd been nailed into the trunk in a random pattern it might have been different, but they formed a horizontal ring about five feet from the ground. Wei found the first just under Howell's medal. They continued around the tree at twelve-inch intervals. As Kane had suggested, they'd been countersunk and the holes plugged with pieces of wood dowel and covered with dirt and moss. By prying out the plugs with a pocketknife, Wei could even see some of the heads. The spikes had effectively girdled the tree, and Wei suspected that the symptoms had as much to do with the fact that they had mortally injured the cambium as with their being made of copper.

What confused him was the appearance of the plugs. They looked relatively fresh, as if they'd been inserted earlier that spring. But this observation didn't square with the history of the disease, which had first appeared the previous spring. Dismissing the discrepancy, he returned his attention to the spikes. He wondered where the perpetrator had gotten them. Copper spikes weren't rare, but nor were they as common as they once had been. The high cost of copper had put it out of reach for use in roofing except in unusual cases. But if there was anyone for whom copper spikes would be relatively easy to come by, it was a developer. Then he remembered the bay windows flanking the door of the house that was featured on the cover of the Apple Ridge brochure. They had had copper roofs.

There it was—motive, means, and opportunity.

He had wanted to tell Rachel MacPherson about the copper spikes, but no one appeared to be home. He was about to head back to the barn when he noticed that a funeral was in progress at the Balmville Presbyterian Church. Among the mourners standing in front of the church, and recognizable by her long Indian cotton skirt, was Rachel MacPherson. She was with two lanky teenaged boys and a tall man who must have been her husband. The mourners were awaiting the passage of the casket, which pallbearers were carrying down the steps toward the waiting hearse.

The bells in the steeple of the country church were chiming a familiar hymn. Wei recognized the melody: It was "There Is a Balm in Gilead." And then he knew the funeral must be for Dora Hamilton.

That night Wei dreamed of the island of Balm of Gilead trees. As in Dora's dream, the leaves were twinkling in the breeze, and, as in Dora's dream, they were making a rustling sound, as if they were trying to tell him something. But as hard as he tried, he

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couldn't make out what they were saying. The words were faint and distant, like muffled conversation on a summer's night. The image of the trees was still fresh in his mind when he awoke at six. He found himself lingering in bed, thinking of the little girl for whose father the trees in the dream had symbolized the end of the journey, the little girl who had now come to her own journey's end. As he lay there thinking of the church bells chiming the hymn at her funeral, it dawned on him what the leaves in the dream had been trying to tell him. Or maybe what his subconscious had been trying to tell him. The church steeple had been encased in scaffolding. A new copper roof was being installed. He remembered how the new copper sheathing gleamed in the sunshine. The leaves had been telling him where the poisoner had gotten the copper spikes.

But that wasn't all the leaves had told him. They had also told him who poisoned the tree and why. And finally, that there was no hope of saving it.

"Well?" Rachel said. She stood with her arm braced on her hip, staring at him in her direct, no-nonsense manner.

It was a couple of days later, and they were standing in her front parlor. The walls were lined with her artworks. They were large and small and in different media—oil, collage, even wood and paper—but they all had two things in common: their vibrant use of color and the primitive vitality of their images. They were images that came from deep in the place in the brain where dreams were made. But it was the painting hanging above the mantel that riveted Wei's attention. It depicted a tree with a stout trunk and three upward-reaching limbs: Rachel's tree. In the painting, the she-tree, as Rachel had called it, looked like an ancient goddess raising her arms in benediction. The scar from the limb that had been removed was a shadowy face and the rim of that scar the cowl of a robe. But it was the girdle of that robe that was the painting's most arresting feature: It was strung out of shiny copper discs.

"The tree was poisoned with copper spikes, as I think you already know," he said. His glance shifted from the painting back to Rachel. "The spikes were taken from the construction site during restoration of the church steeple." He waited for her reaction, but there was none. "But it wasn't murdered."

"Oh?" She looked at him inquisitively, calmly awaiting his explanation.

"It was already dying. As you said, it became seriously ill a year ago last spring, probably due to old age. Like humans, trees have a natural life span, and this tree had long ago exceeded its own. But the person—or persons—who loved it couldn't bear to see it die a long, lingering death. So they helped it along."

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Rachel had taken a seat, but Wei remained standing at the fireplace.

"Persons," she said. "Twenty-three persons, to be precise. Myself and the three other members of my family and the nineteen members of my class who chose to participate."

"One for each spike?"

She nodded. "We did it as a letting-go ritual, with each person saying what that tree—or what trees in general—meant to them as they drove their spike. We asked the tree deva to release the tree's spirit so that it could come forth in another life."

She invited him to sit and he took a seat in a chair opposite her.

Then she told her story. "Shortly after I moved into this house, I started having dreams about a girl with golden ringlets. The dreams were always linked to the tree. I wondered if the girl might be Dora Hamilton and I went to visit her in the senior citizens' home. That was when she told me about her dream and about her special feeling for the Balmville tree. She told me that it was her belief that she and the tree were forever linked and that when the tree went, she would go too. Last spring, she was taken seriously ill. That was the first season the tree showed signs of illness.

"I do trance work with drums," she went on after a pause. "When I went into my trances, I would ask the devas about the tree. I wanted to know what was wrong, what I could do. The message I got was always contradictory. The tree wasn't sure if it wanted to live or die. I suspect the same was true of Dora. During that period, the tree struggled to survive. The tree doctors did everything they could to save it, just as the medical doctors were doing for Dora. Then, late this past winter, I started getting a different message: that it was time to go." She looked at him earnestly. "She was telling me, you see, that this was her heart's desire." She clasped her hands to her own heart. "That's what she wanted: to go, along with the tree. Their fates were inextricably entwined."

By any rational reckoning, Wei should have written Rachel MacPherson off as a crackpot. But he believed her every word. "And you decided to commit euthanasia." He remembered the totem in the form of a boat to carry the tree's soul on its spirit journey.

She nodded. "And perhaps by helping the tree, help Dora too."

"But if you were going to help the tree to its death, why call in the tree surgeons? Why perform healing rituals?"

"Just because you decide to help someone—or something—depart their present life doesn't mean that you don't consult the doctor, that you don't try to make the patient more comfortable. You still do what you can—you prepare meals, administer medicines, offer words of solace, or objects of ritual."

He considered her words. How could he criticize her for doing what

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he would have done under the same circumstances? Though in a somewhat different manner. "Okay," he acceded. "I see your point. But what I don't see is why you blamed it on Cross and Howard. This guy Jim Fowler could have been prosecuted for killing a tree."

"That's doubtful," she said, giving him a sceptical look. "I didn't blame it on them—you did. I just went along with your theory. How would you ever have proved it? And even if you had, the penalty for arboricide couldn't be very steep, if there even is one."

"There is. New Jersey is one of the few states that has an arboricide law on the books. But you're right, the penalty's mild: a fine based on the square-inch area of the stump at a prescribed height. I estimated the fine for the Balmville tree to be about thirty thousand dollars."

"Which would be a drop in the bucket to Cross and Howard. Besides, even if Fowler went to jail for a crime he didn't commit, it would have been just recompense for all the crimes he committed and wasn't punished for."

Wei threw back his head and laughed. "Guarino was right. You *are* a force to be reckoned with."

They went out to visit the tree before he left. Since he had last seen it, the tree surgeons had removed not only the dead limb, but the ailing one as well. The metal stake and the cables had been taken down. All that was left was the main trunk, which had been cut off about fifteen feet from the ground. The ritual objects still adorned the tree's stout torso, and it seemed to wear Howell's medal proudly on its breast. "Some people were affronted that we didn't cut it all the way down," Rachel said. "They wanted it disposed of. The tree surgeons thought I was nuts. But then, they're not the only ones." She laughed. "That's the way we treat death in our culture—sweep it under the rug. But I figured that the tree had been standing guard over this spot for nearly three hundred years and it had a right to go on standing here. I wanted to leave the trunk as a reminder of how extraordinary it was. I didn't want anyone to ever pretend it wasn't here."

"You're going to have to do battle with Cross and Howard," Wei warned. "Now that it's dead, they're going to want to take their entrance road through here."

"I'm up to it. I have my tree devas to support me," Rachel said. She smiled. "Besides, I'm a force to be reckoned with, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Wei said.

As he turned to leave, he noticed a new addition to the tree's ornamentation. In the grass at the base of the trunk rested a rounded cobblestone on whose smooth gray surface a single word had been engraved.

The word was "REMEMBER." ◎

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HALFWAY HOUSE

by Michael Gilbert

"But, my dear," said Lady Fiennes, "you can do both. Enjoy your Midsummer Ball, it sounds great fun. But remember the excellent example set us by Cinderella. Leave the ball when midnight strikes. And drive straight down here."

"What a super idea," said Elizabeth Tallis. "However good a party it is, the last hour always seems to drag. Tell me once more how to get to your new place."

"Simple. When you get out of London just follow the A.2. past Teynham—you head for Faversham. Fork left at Boughton-under-Blean. That gets you to the A.290. Once you're across it, you'll find more than one signpost to Honey Hill."

"How long ought I to allow? I don't want to keep you all up."

"At that time of night, with very little traffic about, you should do it in an hour easily. And we none of us go to bed before one."

"I'm already looking forward to it."

"As you're shutting up your flat, I imagine you're all packed up."

"Surely. I've got all my things in the car. Originally I was planning to drive straight down to my brother's place in Devonshire."

"You can go on there when you get tired of us. We're not a grand party. Mostly students from Kent University and army people from Chatham. We can offer you riding in Clowes Wood, and Colonel Calcott lets us use his big swimming pool."

"Sounds lovely."

"We'll aim to keep you happy for a fortnight at least."

"A night drive in my new car with the hood down seems to me

Mysteries "which serve as showcases for their author's personalities, which indulge in fine writing and are loaded with deep analytical studies of their characters, are not in my opinion members of the true and honorable line of crime stories," said Michael Gilbert in a 1990 article for *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*. Mr. Gilbert's stories seek rather to entertain, and they do so with splendid plotting and colorful detail. †

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the perfect finish to a stuffy evening of eating and drinking."

"Not too much drinking, love. The Kent police are pretty hot on drunk-driving."

"Two glasses of champagne shall be my limit," promised Elizabeth.

But somehow, as so often happens on these occasions, it became three glasses and a small liqueur to keep the champagne in its place. No matter, she had a good head for drink and it was more the fresh air than the alcohol that made her sleepy and accounted for her uncertainty about the way.

The first part was easy. She knew her way out of London, across Blackheath and onto the A.2. The trouble was that she could not remember whether her godmother had said that it was "Before Faversham," or "After Faversham," or even "In Faversham" that she must look for a turning to Boughton. All she was certain about was that it was after Teynham.

Never mind. If she got it wrong she could always turn back. She had made good progress and there was a lot of the night still left.

When she took the first fork after Teynham she could feel the sea breeze on her face and knew that she was heading north.

After ten minutes' drive, with the breeze freshening all the time, she arrived at a point where the road forked. The full moon gave her a clear view of the signpost. Left fork, Connington. Right fork Upton.

She had taken a quick look at the map before she set out, but neither of these names rang a bell. She decided that the right-hand fork was the more likely. Also, by taking further right-hand turns she could circle back ultimately to the main road. And anyway, when she reached Upton she could surely knock someone up and get directions.

The surface of the road had deteriorated into something not much better than a track, but it was perfectly motorable, and the springs of the Milano were one of its best features.

As she bumped along she encountered a strange animal, about the size of a badger, with a tapering snout. It had emerged from the ditch and was standing, gazing up at her car, curious, but seemingly unfrightened by this scarlet and black creature with its glaring eyes that had invaded its domain.

Swerving to avoid it and nearly going into the ditch herself, she continued, cautiously, on her way.

She seemed to remember her godmother telling her something about a nature reserve and smiled at the idea that she might encounter a giraffe or a hippopotamus on this midnight jaunt.

The next thing she noticed was not so amusing.

She had meant to fill up with petrol before she set out, but had

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let the matter slip and the gauge was now pointing unpleasantly close to zero.

She took a quick look round her.

On both sides stretched flat bare fields with very few bushes or trees on them, mostly clumps of rushes between potholes that threw back the light of the moon. A night on the marshes might be romantic, but the idea was not really attractive even to her adventurous spirit.

She had been driving for a full twenty minutes after the road fork. Surely it could not now be far to Upton.

Then, as the road swung to the left, she saw a light. Hurrah! A human habitation and someone still awake. And a further stroke of luck. The building was, as she saw when she drove up to it, a garage. Not a pretentious place. A single pump stood, like a lone sentinel, in the forecourt.

When she slid up alongside it and turned off her engine, the silence was almost complete. But there was a noise somewhere in the background, behind the squat building, which seemed to serve as both dwellinghouse and shop. There was an uncurtained living-room window on one side of the front door, a bulging casement on the other side, through the dim panes of which she could see what looked like tins of fruit or sweets.

She pulled the bell and followed up with a sharp rat-tat on the knocker. Nothing happened. However, she could still hear the hopeful sound of activity, which seemed to be coming from the back of the building, so she followed the stone-flagged path until she could see that the light she had spotted came from a sizeable annexe. It was clearly some sort of workshop.

As she was wondering what to do next, the door of the annexe opened and a man came out.

The light being behind him, she could not see him clearly. Not a dwarf, but a man of below-average height. The proprietor, she supposed.

He listened in silence until Elizabeth had explained, with suitable apologies, how she had got there and what she wanted. When she had finished the man said, "Taking a bit of a chance, weren't you? Coming out at night, with all that finery on."

It was not spoken in a threatening way, but she felt that she would have been happier in broad daylight with a friend beside her.

Since the man seemed to expect an answer, she said, "Yes. I suppose it was rather stupid of me."

When clients came to consult him, Francis Fearne, the senior partner of Fearne and Bracknell, solicitors of Little Bethel by the Tower, normally preferred to see them alone. But on this occasion

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his visitors were clearly important and, equally clearly, disturbed, and he thought he would ask his managing clerk, Horace Piggin, to sit in with him. Mr. Piggin would not be expected to say much, but his sagacious face and venerable bearing had often proved comforting to the distressed.

Also, he would take careful notes and would be available for discussion and action afterwards. Of recent years Fearne had found himself shifting more and more work onto the shoulders of his clerk.

Mr. Piggin did not complain. He enjoyed responsibility.

Lady Fiennes had come accompanied by her nephew, Martin Metcalfe, who appeared, from his flashes and shoulder titles, to be a captain in the Sixtieth.

"His colonel has given him compassionate leave," she explained, "so that he can help me."

Fearne made a noncommittal noise and wondered what precise help this upper-class pair might be looking for.

He was not kept long in doubt.

"It's my goddaughter, Elizabeth Tallis. Her father and mother were killed in that terrible car-ferry accident. I expect you remember it."

Fearne did remember it. A number of his clients had been on the ill-fated *Queen Wilhelmina.*

"You'll understand that I feel responsible for her. In fact, I have become a sort of proxy mother. Which makes it even more worrying when I tell you that she has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Absolutely and completely. She *and* her car. They have vanished off the face of the earth."

"When did this happen?"

"More than a month ago."

"Six weeks," growled the captain.

"And the police haven't been able to do anything about it?"

"Oh yes. They did something. They put her name on the missing-persons list. And informed Interpol."

"Anything effective, I mean."

Lady Fiennes said, "You see, the trouble was they'd got hold of this ridiculous story—"

"Let's get this straight," said the captain. "It's not a story. That's the trouble. It's the truth. Eighteen months ago, when she was driving back to town after a weekend at Honey Hill, she changed her mind. Suddenly and unexpectedly. Turned back in her tracks and headed for Dover. Found a car ferry waiting. Went aboard with her car. Arrived at Calais and drove south."

"Did she explain—?"

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"The only explanation she ever gave was that she suddenly had a feeling that her luck was in and she wanted to gamble."

"And she told no one?"

"On that occasion she did condescend to telephone her godmother, from Monaco."

The way in which he said this demonstrated his disapproval of Elizabeth's whims and fancies.

"And was she? Was she successful, I mean."

"Inside a week she had lost most of the very considerable sum of money she always carried with her and was thinking about raising a loan. Which she could very easily have done. On the security of her diamond bracelets and her diamond choker. But as it happened, this wasn't necessary. On the sixth evening she placed all the money she had left on black. And when it came up she left her stake there. It came up six times running. After which, having doubled her stake each time, she very wisely withdrew it."

Fearne, who had been doing some mental arithmetic, said, "So she multiplied her original stake sixty-four times."

"Correct. And it provoked a story in the local paper—'The Girl Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo.' Which was a complete exaggeration. Unfortunately the police got hold of the story. Immediate conclusion: Elizabeth had repeated her previous escapade. We should be certain to hear from her soon. Probably from somewhere in Europe."

"I understand that," said Fearne. He knew the speed with which an unsatisfactory file could sink to the bottom of the pending tray and get covered by more immediate and pressing matters. "But there's one thing I'm not clear about. If the police of England and Europe have failed to locate her, just what do you think that a small firm of solicitors can do?"

Lady Fiennes said, in a voice that a thousand organizers of charitable events would have recognized, "I know I'm being unreasonable, Mr. Fearne. But I'm sure you can help. My sister, Mrs. Metcalfe, told me how wonderful you were about her father's will—"

"What we're really suggesting," said the captain, "is that you get hold of a firm of private detectives—you'd know the best firms to go to—and put them onto the case."

Fearne said, "The only private detective I know personally is Captain Smedley, an ex-gunner."

The captain nodded his approval of this. An infantry man, in difficulties, always turned to the artillery.

"But as for putting him on the right track, if I'm going to do that, I shall have to start with an assumption that you won't enjoy. Now that six weeks have gone by without a sign of your goddaughter or her car, we must suppose that either she managed

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to get abroad with it—or that she, and it, have been—" he paused for a moment—"have been disposed of in this country."

He could see that the captain had already arrived at that conclusion. Lady Fiennes was still hoping, desperately, for some more comfortable alternative.

"The first step, therefore, will be to see whether Miss Tallis can possibly have taken her car abroad. I assume that the police have, at least, checked on sailings."

"Yes. They did do that. They could find no booking for a Milano coupe. It's not a common sort of car. I doubt if there are half a dozen of them in England."

"There's an alternative possibility. That she left the car at one of the car parks or garages at the port. Have they checked on that?"

"I doubt it."

"Then that is the first thing we must ask Smedley to do. If the answer is still negative, we must pursue our enquiries up the centre line. I mean, a line from the West End of London to your house, north of Canterbury. As you said, the car is not a common type. It may easily have been spotted. I shall suggest that we divide our efforts. Smedley, who already knows most of the people, can take the inland route—the M.2. with a diversion to either side of it. We will tackle the coastal route. Gravesend—Gillingham—Faversham. We can do part of it by boat. There are a number of inlets and bays on the north coast of Kent."

Both of his guests had begun to look more cheerful.

"As long as someone is doing something," said the captain.

"I must warn you that Smedley, though good, is not cheap."

"Money is no object," said Lady Fiennes.

The captain said, "If someone has harmed Elizabeth, let us catch the bastard and nail his hide to the barn door. Cost what it may."

It seemed wise to let Smedley do his stint first. Having been paid a sizeable retainer, he set his employees to work; personable young men able to conduct a house-to-house enquiry without upsetting the householders.

They worked their way along the two inland routes that the car might have taken.

North of the Downs from Rochester to Faversham and then, because they had been told to leave no stone unturned, south of the Downs from Aylesford, through Harrietsham to Challock. The two lines converged at the Boughton turning which led to Blean and then to Lady Fiennes's house at Honey Hill.

It was the northern line that produced the most positive results.

Smedley reported that there was a reasonable body of evidence that the car, fortunately an uncommon make and of a vivid scarlet

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colour, had been seen on the A.2. up to a point south of Teynham and a mile or two short of Faversham.

The results from Faversham itself were negative.

"Bearing in mind," said the report, "that it was a night of full moon and that Faversham is not a place where people retire particularly early to bed, this lack of observation becomes significant. It looks as though the car, *before* reaching Harrietsham, may have diverted into the area of marshland and small villages south of the river Swale."

"That's where my boat may come in useful," said Bracknell's son Hugo, a junior partner in the firm. "It's an interesting part of the world. And I'd been meaning for some time to see whether I could circumnavigate Sheppey. It wouldn't be possible under sail alone. The wind would be too fluky and some of those currents are pretty treacherous. But with an outboard motor—"

"Don't be too long about it," said his father. "We've got the Rumpole estate sales this afternoon and the reinvestment of the proceeds to think about."

"One full morning," said Hugo. "If I can't find something in that time, I'll be ready to assume that she didn't come that way."

Accordingly, on the following morning, he made a very early start and was round the Leysdown end of the Isle of Sheppey by midday.

He had taken his time, penetrating each navigable creek and inlet, encountering a number of semi-wild cattle, but no human beings of any sort. It had not occurred to him before how deserted the southern half of Sheppey was. The two thirds of the island south of the B2231 was a desolate area of field and swamp.

The maps named the right-hand end of it the Isle of Harty and the left-hand end Elmley Island, but these were courtesy titles for two pieces of wasteland divided from the rest by larger dykes or ditches.

Afterwards, discussing events with his father, Hugo had said, "I've never liked nor trusted that stretch of water. There's something uncanny about it. If the tide is making, as it was on this occasion, it should push the boat along easily enough. Hardly necessary to use the motor. But all the time one feels that there is some hostile force at work. Not the current of the Swale, which is being held up by the tide, but a lateral movement, from north to south, almost as though something was coming in under the surface."

His father, having listened to this with interest, had said, "According to the great geologist Christopherson, that is the sort of thing that happens when you have a stretch of land with a strong fresh current on one side of it and a weak one on the other. If the land in between is soft—sand or gravel—then you will get

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an open inlet which will, in time, wash the earth away entirely. Where, however, the intervening soil is clay, as here, the water can only penetrate by forming a pipe. Christopherson calls it a subterranean counterflow."

Hugo had thought that something of this sort must be happening to him at that moment.

He found that at half speed and with the rudder hard over, he was being forced, do what he would, onto the southern bank.

When he gave a fretful jerk to the rudder he felt it go suddenly slack. His final effort had fractured the linkage. Out of control, the boat sidled in among the rushes and grounded on the clay.

Irritating, but in no way dangerous. He found, in fact, that he could step ashore without even getting his feet wet. What was really worrying him was a question of time.

He had planned to have finished his inspection of the coastline of Sheppey by midday. Then to run down to Whitstable, leave his boat with a friend, and catch a bus along the A290 into Canterbury, where he had a date with the manager of the National Provincial Bank at three o'clock.

Whether he could fulfill this programme was now questionable. However, it seemed that his luck was in. It was what he was hoping for, but had despaired of finding.

It was a stout, two-storey building, part dwellinghouse, part shop. Its name, painted in straggling letters on the fascia board, was Halfway House. It had a substantial annexe at the back. Someone was at work in it. He could hear the sound of metal on metal and the purring of an electric motor. Just the place to attend to his broken linkage.

His knocking on the door must have been drowned by the workshop noises, because it produced no reaction. He opened the door cautiously and peered inside.

Someone who had been attending to a lathe looked up, switched off the current, and turned towards him; a man of rather under medium height, with broad shoulders, dressed in oil-stained denims.

Hugo was glad to see that he was smiling.

He said, "George Lampe at your service. What can I do for you?"

Hugo explained what had happened and the sort of help he needed.

"Doesn't sound too difficult," said Lampe. "Let's walk down and have a look at it." And when they had reached the boat and lifted the baseboards, "Yes. I could make a temporary attachment out of wire—triple wire. A bit of welding at each end. Should be strong enough to do the job. It won't be perfect. You'll need a blacksmith for that."

"As long as it gets me out and back."

"Out and back?"

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"Down to Whitstable and back up river as far as the Tower. That's where I hang out."

"You've come a fair distance. Bold of you to come all this way on your own. There are places round here where it pays to have another man with you. Tricky currents and no help at hand if you do hit trouble."

"Right on both counts," said Hugo. "I asked for trouble and I hit it. I haven't seen a living soul since I turned the northwest corner of the island an hour ago."

"Aye. It's a lonely place," the man agreed. He had taken a steel rule from his pocket and was making some measurements.

"Right," he said. "I think that's all I need to see. If you'll come back with me while I cut and shape the attachment. Then the two of us should be able to push you off the bank and send you on your way."

"I'm really very much obliged," said Hugo. He might have added that he was also very much surprised to find a fully equipped workshop in this desolation. He was watching Lampe twisting wire into a two-ended hook. His broad brown hands worked with professional certainty.

Thinking of this turned his mind to the question of payment.

When he stepped ashore he had brought two things with him: a bulging briefcase and a canvas satchel. Opening the briefcase he said, "I'd like to pay you now, if I may, for your labour and materials."

"A fiver will cover the lot," said Lampe.

"I'm ashamed to do this," said Hugo. He was fumbling in the briefcase as he spoke. "I'm afraid I look like one of those American multimillionaires you see in films. You know the type. When they pay for anything they extract a great wad of hundred-dollar bills from their vest pocket and peel off two or three of them."

Lampe, who had suspended operations to watch him, said, "Do you always travel round with hundreds of pounds in your case?"

"Not hundreds. Thousands, I'm afraid. Yesterday afternoon we completed the sales of a number of plots on the Rumpole estate. Normally we'd have expected a certified cheque, or a bank draft, but in this case the purchaser insisted on paying in cash. My father wasn't keen, but all the deeds had been signed and the cash was on the table."

Lampe, who had finished what he was doing to the improvised hook, said, "Why wasn't he keen? If I was offered the choice, cheque or cash, I'd take cash every time."

"It's his experience that people who want to pay large sums in cash are usually operating some sort of tax fiddle."

The idea seemed to amuse Lampe, who smiled as he gave the wires a final twist and tucked in a loose end, using the largest pair of pliers Hugo had ever seen.

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"That should do the job," he said. He moved to a cupboard in the corner and extracted two glasses and a bottle.

"Let's wet our whistles before we fix her up," he said. He poured out a generous tot from the bottle. "Good Scotch. Best drunk neat. But you can have a drop of water in it if you like."

"Neat for me," said Hugo valiantly.

"Down the hatch, then."

Hugo had the glass actually raised to his lips when a thought occurred to him. He said, "I'd better tell the office what I'm up to."

Lampe, who seemed to be watching every move he made with unnerving closeness, saw him dip into the satchel and extract the mobile telephone that always accompanied him when he left the office. After listening for a moment, he said, "Is that you, Piggy? I've run into a bit of trouble, but fortunately I've also run into a good Samaritan. What's that? No. I didn't say his name was Samaritan. It's Lampe. Spelt with an 'e'. That's right. Hangs out in a garage called, I think, Halfway House. It's between Connington and Upton. My steering fractured itself, but he's mended it a treat and I should be in time—just—to do the business at the bank. Perhaps you could give them a ring and tell them I might be a little late."

As he replaced the receiver he said, "What in the world—?"

Lampe had taken his full glass to the sink, tipped the contents out, and was washing it carefully under the cold tap. He said, "It was a moth. Attracted by the light, no doubt. Decided to have a bath in your drink. Filthy little beast."

He returned to the cupboard, fiddled for a moment with the bottles, and came back with two full glasses. Then he said, "Good Luck," and raised his glass and drank.

Hugo echoed the sentiment.

He thought that his luck had indeed been good.

"So I just made it," he said to the partners and Mr. Piggin, assembled, as was their custom, to open the post next morning. "It was a close thing, but thanks to Mr. Lampe I did it." He explained, in some detail, what had happened to him.

But no one seemed to be really interested in Hugo's adventures. Coming in late to the meeting, he had interrupted what Fearne was telling them. It was a great deal more exciting than anything that had happened to him.

"Thinking things over," Fearne was saying, "I came to the conclusion that although it was in order for us to pursue our own investigations, it was wiser to let the police know what we were up to. We didn't want to appear to be working behind their backs. So I called on Chief Inspector Mayburgh at Cable Street. And

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when I had finished passing on to him what Lady Fiennes and Captain Metcalfe had told us, do you know what he said?"

"Something pretty rude, I imagine," suggested Bob Bracknell, who knew the inspector.

"No. This time he wasn't offensive, but he was clearly interested. After he'd thought it over carefully he said, "I don't suppose you realise that Miss Tallis was number five on the list. Might be number six or seven for all we know."

There was a moment of aghast silence. Then Bob said, "Do you mean that five or more people have disappeared?"

"Yes. In the last eighteen months, all of them connected in some way with the north Kent area between London and Dover."

He looked at the notes he had scribbled down while Mayburgh was talking.

"The first was an old darling called Marjorie Hartshorn, who lived near Canterbury. A touch eccentric, her family said, but not in any way certifiable. Although she was over seventy she insisted on driving herself everywhere, alone, and was known to keep a large sum of money in the car. Didn't trust banks, she said. Preferred to keep her money with her. She drove off one morning and could have ended up anywhere in England, Scotland, or Wales. In fact, she had mentioned that she had a date with her solicitor in Lincoln's Inn, but it seems he saw nothing of her. The only other possibility is that she had a married daughter at Oare whom she visited from time to time. Turning up without any prior warning."

"Oare," said Bob thoughtfully. "Then she would have gone off the A.2. at Faversham."

"It's possible. The second one was Rudolf Neligmann."

"The swindler?" said Mr. Piggin.

"The alleged swindler. Since he never came to trial nothing was proved. When he drove off from London, he took with him, according to his fellow directors, a lot of the firm's money. He was thought to be heading for France, or Northern Europe."

"If he was heading for France," said Bob, "it would be Folkestone, Dover, or Newhaven. If for Northern Europe, then it could be Sheerness."

"Whichever way he was planning to go," said Fearne, "one thing is clear. Neither he nor his car has been seen since."

"But surely—" said Bob.

"We'll think of the difficulties when I've told you about the other cases. The third one was a little like Elizabeth Tallis. An independent-minded young lady called Joanne Terry. She had a flat in London that she'd disposed of, and a number of friends in the north Sheppey area where she was negotiating for a house. It might have been with the idea of putting down a cash deposit on the house that she was carrying the proceeds of the flat sale with her. In any

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event, she was traced as far as Teynham and then drove off the map."

"Teynham," murmured Mr. Piggin, who was examining the map spread on the table in front of him.

"Number four," said Fearne, "is, in many ways, the most straightforward. Tom Trescot, owner and manager of Trescot Holidays. Had an office, garage, and boatyard at Reculver. He liked to take a prospective client out in his boat to show him the best fishing and camping areas, and get him well hooked. On this occasion, he was intending to pick up a Mr. Cann at Queenborough. There was a storm in the offing and local weather prophets had advised him against setting out, but he thought he knew better. He had been originally intending, no doubt, to go north of Sheppey, but at some point, with the weather deteriorating, he must have changed his mind, because a fisherman saw him in the mouth of the Swale, heading west."

"Running for shelter," suggested Bob.

"I think that's right," said Fearne. "Anyway, that's the last that was seen of Trescot or his boat."

There was a long silence. All four of Fearne's listeners had been taking notes, and Mr. Piggin had been drawing quite an elaborate plan.

It was Tara Fearne, Francis Fearne's daughter, the youngest of the four partners, who broke the silence.

"When I was a girl at school—" she said.

"Not all that long ago," said Bob.

Tara awarded him a brief smile, but was not to be diverted.

"When we had a mathematical problem we were always told to look for the lowest common denominator. If the four cases the inspector mentioned are all part of the same series—and I think that must be so, or he wouldn't have drawn our attention to them—then it follows that if we are to work out what happened to Elizabeth Tallis, the best way to start would be to work out what points the four earlier cases had in common."

Hugo noted the look of approval on Mr. Piggin's face. This was exactly the mathematical way in which he liked to approach a problem.

"The most persistent common factor," said Fearne, "is the shoulder of land south of the Island of Sheppey, between the Swale and the A.2. An uninhabited area protected from development and set aside as a nature reserve. Marjorie Hartshorn, if making for Oare, would be driving straight up into it. There's a tangle of roads north of Faversham. She could very easily have taken the wrong one. Rudolf Neligmann, heading for Sheerness and very possibly trying to escape observation by choosing minor roads, was making for the same area when last seen. Joanne Terry, also, was heading

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for north Sheppey. Tom Trescot is the most interesting of the lot. He was last seen proceeding up the Swale, no doubt with the idea, in view of the bad weather, of bypassing the Chetney Marshes and reaching Queenborough from the south."

"And I can assure you, from my own experience," said Hugo, "that the lateral current at that point would have landed him in that particular area whether he'd wanted to or not. It takes charge of you in the most uncanny way."

Fearne said, "All right. We have deduced to our own satisfaction that these four people *could* quite well have been in that particular area at one time or another. But does that help us to decide what happened to Elizabeth Tallis? It's quite a sizeable piece of north Kent. It contains two villages, Connington and Upton, and a dozen or more isolated houses and farms."

"With respect—" said Mr. Piggin. There was something in his voice that brought all their heads round. "Are we not perhaps forgetting one point? Have we not six rather than five journeys to consider?"

"Six?" said Bob.

"Certainly. Allow me to outline journey number six. It has all the hallmarks of the other five. In it we have a young man entering the *locus in quo,* encountering a stranger, and, in the course of conversation, disclosing two matters to him. First, that he has encountered no one for some time past. Second, that he happens to be carrying a very large sum of ready money."

"I suppose you're talking about Hugo," said Fearne. "And I must agree that there are similarities in his case. But is there not one important difference? Neither he nor his boat has disappeared."

"That is indeed an important distinction," agreed Mr. Piggin. "And its rationale seems to depend on what Sherlock Holmes might have described as 'The Mystery of the Mythical Moth.' I am referring, of course, to the moth that landed in your glass, Hugo, and prevented you from drinking the contents. Tell us. Did you, in fact, see it?"

"See what? The moth? No. I was too busy telephoning the office. I assumed it existed. Do you mean—?"

"I mean," said Mr. Piggin, "that it was exceedingly lucky that you did telephone. Once you had explained where you were and who you were with, you were in no further danger. But the drink had to be disposed of. Hence the opportune moth. And you say the glass was then rinsed. A pity. It would have been interesting to discover what was in it—apart from whisky."

Mr. Piggin had been speaking slowly, and by this time the others were beginning to understand what he was suggesting.

"You may be right," said Fearne. "The answers to all our questions could lie with Mr. Lampe at Halfway House."

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"Going from east to west," said Bob, "halfway between London and Dover. And halfway from south to north between the A.2. and the river."

"And halfway," said Mr. Piggin softly, "between life and death."

There was a lot more thinking and talking to be done, and further enquiries to be made. It was three days later that Fearne reconvened the meeting.

He invited Mr. Piggin to speak first.

He said, "I had a word with an old friend of mine."—Mr. Piggin seemed to have an astonishing number of old friends—"He's the petrol and oil wholesaler for this district. He tells me that the total amount of his products that Mr. Lampe buys and sells, in any quarter, could hardly generate enough profit, even if you add in fees for small services to the occasional customer, to pay his electric light bills. It was supposed that he must enjoy a private income and that he maintained the premises at Halfway House to give him an excuse to pursue his hobby of metalworking."

"It's a wonderfully well-equipped workshop," agreed Bob, who had called on Mr. Lampe on some pretext and had been shown round. "The sort of place a grown-up schoolboy could be happy pottering about in all day."

"And if our suppositions are correct," said Fearne, "he did indeed have a private income. It came to him at irregular intervals, tax-free, whenever someone who was on their own called at his isolated garage. The visitor had to fulfil a number of prerequisites before he could be ranked as what you might call a prospect. First, and most important, it had to transpire that no one knew precisely where he was. That he had, as you might say, wandered off the map. A common example would be a driver who had lost his way in the tangle of roads between the A.2. and the coast. Another possibility was that the man had been forced onto the bank of the river by that underground current that Hugo has mentioned. He'd need help to push the boat off and would come inland to find it. The second, and equally important point was that the visitor was either carrying money or was, as in the case of Elizabeth Tallis, wearing valuable jewellery. If all these matters were in due order, the procedure could swing into action. The prospect is offered a drink. If he is a man, grateful for Lampe's help, he will probably accept it. If a girl, the chances are she will say no—but a girl could be dealt with by more straightforward means. After which—always bearing in mind that Lampe had no near neighbours—the wooden parts of the boat or car could be burned and the metal parts, cut into manageable chunks at his excellent workshop, could be sunk in the river and rolled down by it, in time, to the North Sea."

When he had finished there was a silence, broken only by the cries

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of a sea bird who appeared to be screaming in protest—"No, no, no."

Then Fearne said, "I passed on the gist of that to Chief Inspector Mayburgh. He was interested, but not totally convinced. He made it clear that he could not move against Lampe without some concrete evidence."

"Then it all depends on one point," said Mr. Piggin.

"On what?" said Bob.

"On what he did with the bodies."

"Would he not have thrown them, also, into the river?"

"It's possible," said Fearne, "but I'm not convinced of it. A body is not inert like a piece of metal. However securely it has been weighted, sooner or later it will wriggle out of its attachment and surface on a reef or sandbank. No, I feel certain that Lampe, being a careful man, would have taken the safer option and buried them somewhere in the wide expanse of water-meadows available to him around his garage. He had all the time he needed and no inquisitive neighbours."

"In that case," said Hugo, "why don't we call in the army? Captain Metcalfe would, I am sure, be only too willing to help us. And a number of his friends are sappers. They'd lend a hand. He mentioned that they've developed a detector—very useful when scanning a suspect minefield—it tells them if the soil has been disturbed."

Metcalfe needed no persuasion. It took him only three days to organize his team.

On the third night, whilst the rind of a moon peeped over the gaunt outline of Halfway House, and its owner slept, a number of men were at work. The breezes from the sea, blowing through the rushes, drowned any small sounds they made.

The first body they unearthed was Tom Trescot. The second was Joanne Terry.

Thereafter, with Lampe now in custody, the search could be extended to his workshop, where an enthusiastic young detective extracted, from the teeth of a metal saw, minute fragments which could be microscopically identified as coming from the bodywork of a scarlet motor car.

This caused less excitement than the discovery of two more bodies. The second of them was Elizabeth Tallis.

Like the others, she had been strangled. ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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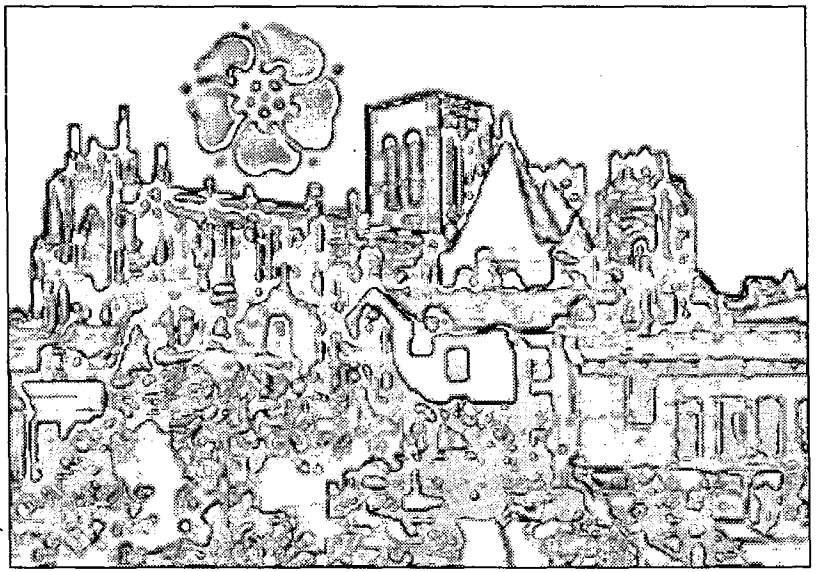

Art by Sandra Wilentz

MAUREEN WELSH

by Peter Turnbull

York. An ancient city. A modern city. An isolated town. A town which is the centre of a road and rail network; all tracks lead to York. A town of learning. A prestigious university. A scattering of private schools like St. James with its castlelike appearance and flogging bench. A city of contrasts, a town-and-gown of a city, a small town which has city status by virtue of ancient charter rather than size. A city of wealth. A city of poverty. A city which sits in the wide, lush vale which is the Yorkshire Wolds of Northern England. It is a city, like any city, an organism, a machine in which humans can function. And where humans live, there is emotion. There is love. There is hate. There is joy, there is pain. And there is passion.

Passion can create life. Passion can destroy life.

Such thoughts entered the mind of Carmen Pharoah. Her observations of the City of York were still falling into place, still being formed. Not an unpleasant place. Interesting, but not unpleasant. Being a newcomer is always interesting. And now the murder, for murder it was—multiple stab wounds in the back, a life ended

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suddenly when not quite middle-aged. Easily young enough for the victim to predecease his parents, doubtless now being informed.

Tragedy. Yes, tragedy; that's the other thing that happens a lot in cities. There's more tragedy than in the rural areas. There just is, she thought, there's no getting away from it. It's difficult to be anonymous in rural areas, and that works as a form of social control. And there are more people in a square mile of city to perform tragic deeds than there are in a square mile of fields. There just are.

Peter Turnbull's stories set in the ancient city of York are a recent addition to his body of work, which had previously consisted mostly of police procedurals set in the Scottish city of Glasgow. In the newer York series, we meet characters with a wider range of cultural backgrounds, and the atmosphere is a little mellower. What remains constant is Mr. Turnbull's attention to the detailed routine of police work. ¶

The scene-of-crime officer's flashbulb exploded in a sheet of brilliant light. Carmen Pharoah blinked and her thoughts returned once more to the matter in hand.

"Passion," said the constable standing beside her.

"I'll say." Carmen Pharoah looked down at the body. A male, six feet in height, or length as he was then, seven stab wounds in his back. She walked out of the kitchen and as she did so she pondered how it was that so many, many domestics occur in the kitchen of the house. She toured the house and rapidly formed the impression that like the city in whose suburbs it stood, this house was a place of contrasts. In places it was neat. In places disorganised. Both inside and out. The garden was neat and well tended. The kitchen disorganised and unhygienic—musty, greasy, sticky, and smelly. The living room was neat. Upstairs there were two bedrooms in use. One was kept neatly, the other was not. The bathroom was unclean and untidy. A study in the attic was neat and well organised. That this was not just a house divided but a house divided along many lines was an impression which rapidly formed in Carmen Pharoah's mind and which was never to leave it. Apparently, she thought, the very design of the house was of division, a central stairway which divided the house into a left side and a right side, and two levels, four if the small attic and half-cellar were counted. The half-cellar clearly belonged to the untidy part of the house, even to the point of the stair to the cellar being cluttered with junk having been thrown down the cellar steps rather than taken down and stored. She left the house and

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walked down the driveway at the side of the garden and noted, with a police officer's eye, a small pool of oil on the concrete which spoke of a car-owning household. And the car, like the lady of the house, was missing.

The lady who occupied the adjacent house, and was therefore the next-door neighbour of the deceased and his wife, was, Carmen Pharoah found, a small woman, starched clean, with short-cropped hair, holding herself erect; white blouse, grey skirt, shoes that were highly polished and closer to boots than shoes. She was about sixty, thought Carmen Pharoah, and, she found, had a personality made of steel.

"I confess, I always thought they made an odd couple, very ill matched. Her with her name, him with his." She spoke in a strong Yorkshire accent, not without education, but her eyes betrayed hostility towards Carmen Pharoah who, in turn, was amused by the woman's confusion. The respect for the uniform, the disapproval of the pigmentation of the woman wearing it. What she had found was the small-town mentality that is prevalent in York; behind the seats of learning and the magnificent medieval buildings, there is a small-town mentality which struggles to find expression.

"Tell me."

"Aye, well, she was a small woman, with quick, hurried movements, always in a state of panic, at least that's what it looked like. . . . Well, not panic . . . what do I mean? If my man was alive, he'd be able to tell you, he had a way with words, always knew the right word for the situation. No qualifications. Left school at fifteen and spent his life as a jobbing carpenter, but what a way with words."

"Anxiety?"

"Yes . . . aye . . . anxiety would be a better word. Never saw that little woman relax for a second. Always seemed upset, always seemed obsessed with something. How he tolerated her I don't know, him so calm and unhurried, so relaxed. It wasn't uncommon to hear her banging about, I mean smashing things up. Once he was in the garden, digging away, and there she was, smashing crockery in the kitchen. She was having a 'do.' You know, something had set her off and he just let her smash the place up. He just went on calmly working in the garden. Mind you, that was probably a good idea. She always struck me as the sort of woman who'd stick a knife in someone for the slightest reason, and not necessarily the one who had upset her. If you were close at hand, you'd be the one to pay. She just struck me as being that sort of woman."

Carmen Pharoah remained silent.

"You see, there was an incident once, soon after they moved in;

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she came to my house and stood in my kitchen and saw the knives I had on my wall, still have them. Anyway, she expressed surprise that I kept them because a burglar could use them against me. I mean, I've never seen them as anything else but legitimate kitchen tools but as soon as she set eyes on them she saw them as weapons to be used against a person. I mean, that's not right, is that, that sort of thinking?"

"Certainly doesn't seem so. Would you know where Mrs. Welsh is, or may be likely to be?"

"She's a librarian. At Selby. This is a weekday, perhaps she's at work? Selby library."

"We'll check. Doubt if she'll be there somehow."

"What's happened? I saw the police cars . . ."

"We have found Mr. Stamison, deceased."

"Oh my."

"Well, the milkman found him, called to collect his money like he does each Friday, kitchen door was open and there was Mr. Stamison. . . . I'm only telling you because you'll find out eventually, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't broadcast it."

"Of course."

A blackbird sang.

Ken Menninot reclined in his chair and looked at the black and white scene-of-crime photographs. Not just photographs of the corpse, a well-built, bearded male with multiple stab wounds between his shoulder blades, but also photographs of the footprints on the kitchen floor: by their size and type of footwear, clearly his and hers.

"I think it's possible to guess what happened." Aaron Otley leaned forward.

"You believe so?" Menninot had time for Otley. He was a good scene-of-crime officer, put more of himself into the job than did most others.

"Well, yes, as you see, the footprints come up clearly—they were made on a damp surface, as if the kitchen floor had had a very unusual and infrequent clean just minutes before the incident took place. So you see his footprints and hers. Here they faced each other. He's standing still, she's moving from one foot to the other."

"As if she's angry about something?"

"Yes, sir. Then, as you see in this photograph, they both turn away from each other. But he's not turning to walk away, he's just turning his back on her for some reason. She, on the other hand, turns to her right, walks two paces to the working surface, and then returns to her original position. Then there's much distur-

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bance about the body, and then her footsteps turn away again and lead out of the house."

"And as so often with 'domestics,' it happens in the kitchen."

"It's in keeping with the nature of most murders, I think you'll agree, sir. They rarely have the intrigue that television drama would have us believe. Most are cheap, senseless, and motiveless. A real waste."

"So what do you think happened, Aaron?"

"An argument in the kitchen. He saw her turn to reach for a knife and turned his back on her, believing that she wouldn't stab him in the back."

"Stabbed seven times in the back." Bill Hatch studied his notes, holding his notepad in one hand and the telephone in the other. He glanced out of the window of his office and allowed his gaze to follow a double-decker bus as it glided along Wiggington Road towards the walls.

"Seven." Menninot, in his separate office, also holding a phone in one hand but a pen in the other, scribbled on his pad.

"All could have caused death—lungs punctured—but one slid past the spine and penetrated the aorta. That would have been instantly fatal."

"Quite deep wounds then?"

"Oh, yes, it would have needed strength and determination to cause them. There's also bruising to the lumbar region and also to the shoulders."

"What do you think caused them?"

"Hard to say, but the bruises to the lower back have a crescent shape, they would be consistent with a smaller person than the deceased kneeling on his back. The bruise to the shoulder could have been caused by a vicelike grip."

"Someone kneeling on his back, his lower back, steadying themselves by holding his shoulder whilst plunging the knife into his back?"

"Possible. Possible. Not impossible. Not even improbable."

Menninot wrote on his pad. "Defensive wounds?"

"None."

"He was attacked from behind."

"Possibly. It would be an explanation for the lack of defensive wounds. As a pathologist I can only offer possible explanations."

"Understood."

"There's scar tissue on the thigh, which may be significant. His left thigh, a penetrative knife wound of some months or years old. He was stabbed twice in the left thigh. Would have been painful and would have induced a limp."

"So we have a pattern of violence?"

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"Possibly, perhaps, maybe . . ."

"Difficult?"

Simon Markov had rapidly established that Maureen Welsh had not attended her place of work that morning, much, he detected, to the relief of her colleagues. He then asked the lady who had answered his call with a very pleasant telephone manner and who had given her name as Jennifer Sewill and whose designation was Head Librarian what sort of person Maureen Welsh was? Mrs. Sewill said that she was "difficult."

"Have to elaborate . . ." Mrs. Sewill paused. "I can only explain what I mean by an example."

"Please do."

"Well, once, for instance, she was replacing returned books on the shelves and was carrying far too many books, deliberately so. I mean, if she should have been carrying five, she was in fact carrying fifteen. Those were not the precise number of books, but what I mean is that she was carrying in excess of what she or anyone could manage, and inevitably she bumped into something and the books went flying. She went onto her hands and knees, as if she were a poor creature that had been given an impossible task and she had failed, but through no fault of her own. She wanted to be the victim of an injustice. It really was quite pathetic, and of course she made sure she did it when the library was quite full. Many people saw her so she had lots of lovely humiliation. And of course one or two people went to her assistance and she just crouched there lapping up all the sympathy and all the attention. Confess it made my blood boil."

"I see. I've met the type."

"She came from Leeds; moved to York before she married and complained that she had to do eight trips in her little car to move all her belongings from one address to the other and that no one lifted a finger to help her. But once I got to know her, I knew why nobody would help her. Just to get involved with her is to court disaster. She was burning up with bitterness about something, hated her father for some reason but never explained why. I find her to be a poisonous woman who's intent on making the world around her carry her emotional baggage. We all have emotional baggage of greater or lesser extent, but we don't ask other people to carry it for us, at least we shouldn't. 'Pick up thy bed and walk.' How she married I don't know. I met her husband once—tall, placid, biddable—but I have heard that there is a chemistry which works between such men and small, feisty women. So that may explain her marriage."

"How was she in recent days?"

"As ever, Sergeant."

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"Constable. I'm a detective constable."

"Sorry. Well, as ever. A bit more difficult than usual, as if she was building herself up for something. Just yesterday she burst into our staff room where the staff were having a coffee break and said, 'You're all talking about me.' Then she stormed out again. The rich thing was that we *were* talking about her."

Markov laughed.

Carmen Pharoah signed off duty at 14:15 hours and noted that Simon Markov had signed off five minutes earlier. She walked out of Friargate Police Station and strolled, enjoying the late September sun, and pondered that global warming might not be a bad thing. Anything, she thought, anything that could make the north of England as warm as her beloved St. Kitts was no bad thing. She walked to the Kings Head where Simon Markov was waiting for her. They had a beer each under low ceilings and within dark-panelled walls. Then a bar meal of chili con carne and rice. At the conclusion of the meal Markov said, "Well, your place or mine?"

"Don't mind."

"Mine's a tip. I've let the housework slip."

"Mine then. You know how I feel about tips."

Ken Menninot thought the couple stoical. To say that they were taking it well was, he thought, an understatement. Mr. and Mrs. Stamison sat on the settee in their low-beamed home, hand in hand. Theirs was a half-timbered home, beams set in plaster in the internal walls, a large open-hearth fire and a grandfather clock which ticked solemnly. Also in the room was an Anglican priest, wearing a grey shirt and a clerical collar.

"We asked him to consider marrying Maureen very carefully. In fact, I think you could say we asked him to reconsider." Mrs. Stamison spoke with controlled anger. "I mean, what woman would want marriage but would steadfastly refuse to give up her name? I know it's a new trend, and maybe we are a traditionalist family, but I felt that she didn't do that for the feminist cause but to annoy this family."

"Sylvia . . ." Her husband pleaded with her.

"Oh, she did, David, she did. She did that only to annoy us. I knew that as only a woman can about another woman. I mean, consider the way she greeted me the first time we met. . . . Think about the incident in the restaurant. . . ."

"Oh . . ." David Stamison's hand went up to his forehead. The reference to the restaurant was clearly painful for him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Menninot." Mrs. Stamison turned to him. "I'm sorry, we should explain. . . . When Maureen was first introduced to us, she came in that door there . . . into this room, and ran at

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me. . . . I mean ran, didn't she, David? She ran at me and hugged me like I was her sister whom she hadn't seen for heaven knows how long, yet this was our first meeting. We'd never set eyes on each other . . . and she flung her arms around me. . . . I could understand a handshake . . . but I reacted by stiffening and stepping backwards."

"Quite understandable," Menninot commented.

"Well, I'm glad you think so because as soon as I stepped back, she also stepped back, gave me this terrible look and walked into another room, totally uninvited, I might add, and went into a sulk. Richard went in to speak to her and we could hear him saying things like 'come on, you can tell me . . .' and expressions in that vein. Eventually, after lots of coaxing, she came out with some nonsense about only wanting to be warm and friendly but I had rejected her."

"She had planned that little act all along," David Stamison added. "She wanted to start her relationship with this family from a position of my wife having wronged her. It really was transparent. If my wife had responded by hugging her and dancing round the room with her, she wouldn't have known how to handle it." David Stamison was, like his wife, silver-haired, slender, of distinctive appearance. Menninot thought that they complemented each other well.

"You either collude with games like that and allow such a person to manoeuvre herself into a powerful position whereby everybody in the household is frightened of upsetting her and she knows it—and that is a poisonous household; in such households you spend each day walking on glass—or you have nothing to do with such a person. What you can't do is negotiate and reason with someone who's bent on manipulating the world around her."

"Which is why we asked Richard to reconsider his decision to marry her. But he felt he had to go along with his decision. And their wedding . . . only our side was at the wedding. We thought her family were boycotting it, but it turned out she didn't tell her family she was getting married—I mean exactly when. . . . She had agreed to send out the invitations but never did so and spent the whole time apologising for the family's absence."

"And it was a civil wedding, which was disappointing for our family. But life went on, and after they married, about a month afterwards, we went to a restaurant, a good restaurant but not exceptionally so. Anyway, in the middle of the meal she suddenly announced that she wanted to pay for her share. Totally unexpected remark, and we said something about enjoying the meal first and then talking about paying, which set her off. She picked up her handbag and dropped money, paper money, all over the table. . . ."

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"How do you handle that?" Sylvia Stamison pleaded to Menninot, who could only shake his head. "Anyway, then she made some remark about being pulled from the gutter so what could we expect? She then left the table and sat sulking in the foyer of the restaurant, but in view of all the other diners. Horrible."

"What you might call having an overdeveloped sense of the dramatic," Menninot offered. He was at a loss as to what else to say. "But thanks, this is certainly helping to shed light on the murder of your son. We know what sort of person we'll be talking to."

"I hope you do know, she'll be twisting things around in her mind so that she feels she is a victim in some way." David Stamison shook his head. "We had been a happy and successful family. No major traumas . . . then that thing joined us. Richard was a teacher, you know. St. James College. He never wanted to do anything else, just teach."

The Anglican clergyman accompanied Menninot to the door and then said, "I'll walk down the garden with you."

"I presume you're the family's priest?" Menninot fell into step with the minister as their feet crunched the gravel on the path, which drove a winding route between an orchard to their right and a lawn to their left. A golden Labrador sat on the lawn looking wide-eyed and puzzled.

"He knows something has happened," said the clergyman, glancing at the Labrador. "Otherwise he'd be barking at you. No . . . no, I'm family. They're my parents. Richard was my younger brother."

"I'm sorry."

"My parents are being mild, generous even, in their assessment of Maureen. She was not only difficult but had a terrible temper. . . . But it was all premeditated. We had a dinner party once—Richard, Maureen, myself, and a female partner of mine—held at the house Richard owned before he was married. Maureen spent the entire afternoon at his house, bringing with her her tablecloth and cutlery and plates. Totally unnecessary because Richard had everything that was needed. But Maureen insisted, and so Maureen got what Maureen wanted, as always. Over the meal she was very noisy, knowing Richard was keen to keep the noise down—neighbours, you know."

"I see."

"Anyway, that night we all agreed to stay over at Richard's house, but something happened after we had retired for the night. Richard said something and Maureen totally overreacted, stormed round the house, burst into the room where my partner was sleeping, and said, 'Do you know what he's done to me after all I've done for him today?' Actually, none of us knew what happened between them except that it must have been trivial. Then she

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went downstairs and collected all her cutlery and utensils in her tablecloth and stormed out of the house, carrying them over her shoulder like Father Christmas."

"Hence insisting that she bring all her kit."

"Exactly. She'd planned it all along, days in advance, intending to provoke him into saying something she could take umbrage at and so, in her mind, but only in her mind, justify her tantrum."

"Extraordinary female."

"Is a mild way of putting it, but off she stormed into the night as some injured party in need of peace offerings and compensation. Then she came back and pounded on the door just to make sure all the neighbours were awake, and then shouted something. Then she repeated her exit. And poor Richard just couldn't see her for what she was. He went to see her the next day with a bunch of flowers. They married shortly afterwards and she led him a dog's life. At the end they had effectively split the home into territories. His bits and her bits."

"Yes, my colleague D.C. Pharoah reported it to be a house of contrasts. Some parts neat and clean and others, well, less so."

"I don't have to tell you which were her rooms and which were his." They reached the gate and the priest said that he blamed himself for his brother's murder.

"How so?" Menninot searched for his car keys.

"Well, she attacked him once, plunged a knife into his thigh, caused him to limp for a week or two. I knew that that was a harbinger. I knew worse was to come. I told him that if she ever reached for a knife, he was to turn his back on her. She's a game-player, I said; she'll put herself into a wronged position, but she won't put herself into a wrong position. Even she couldn't justify stabbing anyone in the back. How wrong I was."

"So it seems. We've still to talk to her."

"She'll have some tale of wrongdoing on Richard's part to explain her action, something to justify plunging a knife seven times into his back."

"Where do you think she'll be?"

"Now, as we talk? Well, she'll know that you will have circulated the registration number of her car to the police patrols and so she'll be sitting in a lay-by somewhere, waiting to be arrested, looking forward to all that lovely, lovely attention, and getting herself worked up into a victim frame of mind."

Menninot drove away from the Stamison house. He glanced at his watch. 2:30 P.M. He thought the afternoon shift could handle it from here. He was anxious to sign off. He was very anxious to return to Beverley, to his wife and children. Much more anxious than he normally was. O

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Midnight Pass

by Robert J. Randisi

"Midnight Pass" introduces a character that its author, Robert J. Randisi, hopes will become the star of a series of novels. Truxton Lewis is a "house-sitting" detective, a retired cop who goes wherever he can find a residence in need of his care. The locale this time is Florida, where a busy beach camouflages a corpse.

1.

The only thing Truxton Lewis and his son-in-law ever agreed on was that he should go to Florida...

As Tru Lewis unpacked his suitcase his daughter's words echoed in his ears as she had spoken them in the living room of his house in Queens, New York, just days before.

"You're sixty-two years old, Dad!"

"Sixty-one."

"Sixty-one, sixty-two, what's the difference?"

He'd smiled at his thirty-five-year-old daughter and said, "When you're sixty-one you'll know the difference, sweetie."

"My point is," Margaret Lewis Statman went on, gritting her teeth, "that you're too old to go traipsing off into unknown territory—"

"You make it sound like I'm going gold-panning in the Yukon," Tru had said, cutting her off. "I'm going housesitting in Florida."

"You don't *know* anybody in Florida—"

"Sarasota, to be exact."

"My *point* is—"

"Or to be truly exact," he'd gone on, "Siesta Key."

At that she had turned to his son-in-law the Jewish dentist and asked, "Murray, help me out here."

To his everlasting credit, Murray Statman said, "I think it's a good idea, Maggie."

"What?"

"Since your mother died," Murray went on, "I've thought your father should get out of this house, and now—a year later—he is."

"Thank you, *boychik,*" Tru Lewis—who was not Jewish—had said.

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For the first time since they'd met, they agreed on something. . . .

Truxton Lewis, ten years removed from his job as a detective with the New York City Police Department, and a widower for just over a year, was unpacking his suitcase in a two-bedroom condo in Siesta Key, on Midnight Pass, the Key's main drag. He had put some ads in newspapers all over the country—well, papers from places he wanted to go—that said MATURE MALE IN SIXTIES AVAILABLE FOR HOUSESITTING. NONSMOKER, NO PETS, WIDOWER. Actually, he'd gone back and added the word "early" in front of the "sixties" part. He'd been delighted to get a call from a realtor in Florida about a condo in Sarasota—on Siesta Key—that needed looking after for a couple of months, and he'd jumped at it.

He stopped in the middle of unpacking and walked to the sliding doors of the balcony off the living room. He unlocked them, slid one door open, and stepped outside. While there was a parking lot just below him, Midnight Pass went right by the condo, and he could see the water beyond it. The Gulf, he thought, although he wasn't all that sure. The sand was white and there was a lot of beach, only dotted with people rather than packed the way the New York beaches were. It was January, just after New Year's—off-season down here. He thought he could see a couple of women in bathing suits, but for the most part the people seemed to be wearing long pants and windbreakers.

He decided to put off his unpacking and walk down to the beach.

Tru Lewis did not own a pair of Bermuda shorts, white shoes, or a white belt. He was determined *not* to dress like an old man or a tourist. Oh, he knew he was old—sixty-one was old in any society—but he didn't *feel* old, so he refused to dress like some out-to-pasture golf duffer. He put on a pair of lightweight khaki pants, a light blue T-shirt, and a light brown windbreaker. The only concession he made to the fact that he was in Florida was a pair of black sandals—but not the kind where he had to have something between his toes. He hated that. Because it was breezy out, he put a Yankee cap on his head to cover his full complement of white hair, left the condo, and headed for the beach. He made sure he had the key to the front door before he locked it behind him. That reminded him that he still had his Brooklyn house key around his neck. He used to lock himself out of the house all the time when Virginia was alive, but he'd had to learn not to do that over the past year, because she was no longer there to let him in.

He started down the hall toward the elevator when the door of another condo opened and a woman stepped out.

"Oh!" she said, putting her hand to her chest. "You startled me."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I'm Truxton Lewis, your neighbor."

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"My . . . neighbor?"

"Yes, I'm in . . . fourteen?"

She appeared puzzled for a moment, then brightened and said, "Oh, you're the housesitter?"

"That's right."

"I'm Evelyn Smith," she said, extending her hand. "Mr. . . . Lewis, did you say?"

He shook her hand and said, "Yes, Truxton Lewis."

"Truxton," she repeated, "that's an unusual name."

"Yes," he said. "It is. My friends call me Tru."

"Did you just arrive today . . . Tru?" she asked.

"Yes. I haven't even finished unpacking. I thought I'd go for a walk on the beach."

"Well," Evelyn said, "I was just going to run some errands, so I'll ride down in the elevator with you."

"I'm glad to have the company."

As they rode down, Tru was totally unaware that his attractive fiftyish neighbor was "checking him out." He'd have been pleased, though, to know that she was guessing his age at fifty-five or -six, a good half-dozen years younger than he actually was. Widowed for only a year after over forty years of marriage, he was still very much unaware that women of varying ages found him attractive.

As they left the building, Evelyn asked, "Will Mrs. Lewis be joining you down here?"

"No," he said, "I'm a widower."

Having gleaned the information she wanted on the first try, she said, "Well, enjoy your walk on the beach, Tru. I'll see you later."

"It was very nice meeting you."

He headed for the beach without a backward look, and Evelyn, noticing this, started to worry that she needed to get her hair done again.

He was surprised at how much space there was on the beach. He'd thought that an illusion from his fourth-floor balcony, but it was the same up close. It wasn't that there were no people around, it was just that there was so much sand.

Most of the people were scattered about, seated on lounges or folding chairs. Others—more intrepid, since it was January—were down by the water. He was surprised and pleased to notice that there were not a large number of small children. He found that, at his age, he had little tolerance for small children—even his own grandchildren, if he was around them long enough. Oh, he loved his grandchildren, but in small doses.

He noticed there were quite a few men and women of his age on the beach. Most of them were couples, but he noticed one man who had made himself comfortable on a lounge chair, tugged his cap

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down over his eyes, and gone to sleep. He thought that when he found a chair available later in the week he might try that himself.

He checked out the snack bar, getting himself a diet Coke—he thought he detected the hint of a New York accent in the speech patterns of the guy working there—and then the gift shop, picking up some postcards to send home to friends and family. After about an hour he left the beach and went back to the condo to finish unpacking.

2.

Several hours later Truxton was unpacked and had made himself a cup of tea. He carried the cup around the place with him as he familiarized himself with the apartment. It was much too big for one person to live in, with a large kitchen and living room, a smaller dining room, and the two bedrooms. There was also a small room off the front door that could have been a family room or a small office. At the moment, there was a wicker chair and desk set in there.

He found the master bedroom and decided to do what snooping he could without opening any drawers or doors. He ended up simply studying some framed photographs on the dresser top. They were only shots of the same two people, a man and a woman, apparently middle-aged. There were pictures of each of them alone, and then some of them together. He decided that while they made a handsome couple, they each looked decidedly happier in the photos where they were pictured alone.

He finished the tea and carried the empty cup into the kitchen. He rinsed it out immediately rather than set it down in the sink. That done, he went back into the living room and looked out the window at the beach. The sun was going down and the beach was empty, except here and there where someone was walking. In the area where he had been that afternoon he noticed that someone was still in a lounge chair. He thought it might be the man he'd seen, with his cap pulled down over his eyes. Could he have remained asleep this long?

While familiarizing himself with the condo, he had seen a pair of binoculars. Where had they been? Oh, yes, on a shelf—there they were. Good ones, too. High-powered. He took them to the sliding doors with him, stepped out onto the balcony, and trained them on the beach. Sure enough, he recognized the cap and jacket the sleeping man had been wearing. It was windy now, and a flap of the man's jacket was blowing in the breeze. Wouldn't that be enough to wake him up?

Briefly, he considered calling 911, but what if he was wrong? He'd be taken for an old retired cop with an overactive imagination. Certainly a wrong impression to make on his first day.

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He shook his head and went back inside. Better just to forget about it and not go looking for trouble where it didn't exist.

He tried to watch the TV, surfing the seventy or so cable channels that serviced the area, but half an hour later he was back at the balcony door, and the man was still on the lounge chair. Blowing air out of his mouth, he donned his jacket and left the condo to walk across to the beach and have a look himself.

When he reached the beach there was no one on it but the man on the lounge chair. No one within a hundred yards in either direction. The snack bar and gift shop were closed, and it was getting dark and cooler. If nothing else, maybe he'd just wake the man and keep him from getting cold and damp, maybe sick.

He approached the still figure and spoke.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Excuse me?"

No reply.

"Damn it," he said, aloud, "you better be a sound sleeper."

But he knew better, even as he approached. He'd seen enough dead bodies in his twenty-seven years with the department to have a sense about them. He stopped at the chair, reached out, and removed the cap from the man's head. His eyes were closed, but he still could have been asleep.

"Yeah, yeah," Tru Lewis said aloud. He reached out and pressed two fingers to the man's neck, but he could not locate a pulse. It was then that he saw the blood, inside the jacket, on the man's chest. Not only was he dead, but somehow, in the middle of a populated beach, he'd managed to get himself shot to death with no one the wiser.

3.

Tru had to deal first with the sheriff's department before he could get to the city detectives. He told his story to a deputy, then to the sheriff, then to a sheriff's detective, then to the city cops, then finally to a couple of Sarasota detectives. He told them all the same thing. He was a retired New York City cop vacationing here, and he had stumbled upon a dead body on the beach.

It was pitch dark out, with very little light from a sliver of a moon. Most of the light came from the police cars that had trained their headlights on the body. They were still waiting for a coroner's wagon to come for the body, which remained on the lounger as if the man were simply asleep. Tru was sitting in the back of the Sarasota detectives' unmarked car. The back door opened and one of them got in with him, holding two containers of coffee.

"We sent somebody for these," he said to Tru. "One with milk,

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one without. I can take it either way, so you get your choice."

"Black," Tru said, and accepted the container. "Thank you."

"Sugar?"

"I don't use it."

"Yeah," the man said, "I shouldn't either," but he proceeded to put three packets into the cup before stirring it with a red plastic stirrer. This was Detective Bradley, middle-aged, with an open, pleasant face. His partner, about ten years younger, was Detective Simms, dark, glowering, not friendly looking at all. Who played good cop and who bad cop was never an issue, Tru'd bet.

"Mr. Lewis," Bradley said, "we appreciate you sticking this out with us."

"My fault we're all here," Tru said. "After all, I found him."

"Excuse me, but it's the killer's fault we're here," Bradley said, "not yours."

"Good way to look at it, Detective."

Bradley studied Tru for a few moments in the light from the dome lamp and then said, "You were a boss, weren't you?"

Tru hesitated, then said, "I retired a captain of detectives."

"I knew it," Bradley said. "The way you talk to us, and hold yourself—"

"I mean no offense, Detective—" Tru said hurriedly.

"No, no," Bradley said, "none taken. I'm just pleased with myself that I picked it up, is all."

"I see."

"Would you mind, Captain, telling me again how you figured out this man was dead?"

"I saw the blood—"

"I mean," Bradley said, cutting him off, "from your balcony."

Tru tried to be patient. After all, he'd been through this himself, asking the same questions over and over again during an investigation. However, he was finally getting to experience how it felt from the other end. He explained again about arriving that day, interrupting his unpacking to walk on the beach, when he first noticed the man. Then explained about going back to the condo and spotting the man again from his balcony. "It made me curious, is all," he said. "How somebody could just sit that way for so long."

"Did it occur to you he might just be asleep?"

"It did," he said. "His jacket was flapping in the wind, though. I thought that should have awakened him."

"And how did you notice that?"

"With binoculars."

"Oh, right. Go ahead, please."

"After I used the binoculars and determined it was the same man, I decided to walk down here and check it out."

"Why not just call nine-one-one?"

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"That would have been embarrassing if I was wrong," Tru said. "I didn't want to be the old geezer who jumped to conclusions."

"Not so old," Bradley said. "When did you retire?"

"Ten years ago."

Bradley looked surprised.

"After how many years?"

"Twenty-seven."

"If you don't mind me asking," Bradley said, "how old are you? I mean, you don't look old enough to have been in that long, and retired that long."

"I'm sixty-one."

"God bless you," Bradley said, "I hope I look that good when I'm sixty-one."

Tru was aware he looked younger than he was, but allowed himself to enjoy the comment—heartfelt or not. He still didn't have a handle on Detective Bradley, so didn't know if the man was buttering him up or not. "Again, if you don't mind me asking," Bradley said, "you retired pretty young . . ."

"Twenty-seven years seemed to be enough," he said, "and I wanted to spend some time with my wife, maybe travel a little."

"Did you travel?"

"As it happens, no," Tru said. "My wife's health began to fail. She wasn't up to traveling."

"And is she with you?"

"She died a little over a year ago, after a long and debilitating illness."

"Oh, I'm sorry . . ."

"We never did get to travel," he repeated, "so I thought I'd do it myself."

"Which condos did you say you were in?"

"The place is called Key Waves."

"Expensive for a retired cop."

"I don't own it, Detective," Tru said, "I'm housesitting."

"For free?"

"Actually," Tru said, "I'm paying something, but much less than it would normally rent out for."

"That's some deal," Bradley said. "How do you get a deal like that?"

"You advertise—"

The front passenger door was opened abruptly and Bradley's partner stuck his head in. "Coroner's here."

"About time," Bradley said. He looked at Tru. "You might actually get to go home tonight, Captain."

"Captain?" Detective Simms repeated.

Bradley opened the door on his side. "I'll explain later," he said, getting out.

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4.

They finally let Tru Lewis go home, with the understanding that they would come to the condo the next day to take a statement from him. "I can come to your precinct—or whatever you call it down here—to do that," Tru had said.

"No, no," Bradley had said, "we'll come to you. Just call it professional courtesy."

"Well . . ." Tru had said, ". . . I appreciate that . . ."

"Besides," Simms chimed in, "we want to get a look at this balcony of yours."

So much for professional courtesy. . . .

They arrived the next morning after breakfast. Tru had a fresh pot of coffee going and offered them both some. They accepted, and all three carried cups out onto the balcony.

"Where are those binoculars you told us about?" Bradley asked.

"I'll get them." Tru stepped back inside long enough to grab them, brought them out, and handed them to Bradley.

"Whoa!" he said, when he held them to his eyes. "Is this how they were set when you used them?"

"Yes."

Bradley handed them to his partner.

"You can see every grain of sand," he said.

Simms nodded and held them to his eyes.

"You could only have seen the man's back, though," he said.

"And the part of his jacket that was flapping in the wind."

Simms turned and looked at him.

"And that was enough to tell you he was dead?"

"That was enough," Tru said, "to make me curious about why he was still out there."

"Let's go back inside," Bradley said.

They did, and Tru closed the door behind them.

"Don't do that," he said. He'd caught Simms starting to put his cup down on the expensive-looking coffee table in front of the sofa. "I don't live here, I'm just housesitting."

"I'm finished with it," Simms said.

"Would you like some more?"

"No, thanks."

"Give it to me, I'll take it into the kitchen."

Simms handed Tru the cup.

"And you?"

"I don't drink mine as fast as my partner drinks his," Bradley said. "Thanks."

Tru took the empty cup and put it in the sink. He poured himself some more and went back to the living room. Bradley was sitting on the sofa. He noticed the detective was using a magazine as

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a coaster. Simms was sitting in one of the easy chairs. Tru sat in the other one. "Captain, I told my partner your background," Bradley said. "I'm afraid he's not impressed."

"I don't like ex-cops who go private," Simms said, frankly.

"Were you under the impression that I was a private eye or something?" Tru asked. "I'm here on vacation."

"And you found a body," Simms said.

"By accident."

"From up here."

"What are you implying, Detective Simms?" Tru asked. "That I arrived yesterday and decided to go down to the beach and kill a man?"

"Of course he's not implying that," Bradley said. "He's just being a jerk. Isn't that right, Hal?"

"Yeah," Simms said. "I'm bein' a jerk."

"Why don't you go down to the beach and talk to some people? The snack bar and gift shop should be open by now."

"I guess I'll do that," Simms said, and left without another word to Tru.

"He's like that," Bradley said when he'd gone.

Tru wasn't sure if they were trying to play good cop/bad cop with him or not. "Tell me what you want, Detective Bradley," he said, "without any games. Just come out and ask me."

"I just want to know that you're telling us all there is to tell, Captain," Bradley said. "That's all."

"Everything I've told you is the truth."

"But have you told me everything?"

"Yes."

"I wrote down most of what you told me last night," Bradley said. "Enough to have it typed up." He took the typed statement from his pocket and handed it to Tru. "If it looks okay to you, you can sign it. If not, let me know."

Tru scanned the document and found it accurate. "You either listen well or take good notes," he said, signing it and handing it back.

"A little of both, I think."

He put the statement away and then sat looking at Tru.

"Were you a good detective, Captain?"

Tru smiled. "I'll bet you checked already."

Bradley smiled sheepishly, caught.

"You're right. I called New York and spoke to your chief of detectives. He said he'd take you back on the job right now if you'd go."

"That's nice of him."

"Said you were the best detective he ever saw."

"That's generous of him."

"Let me ask you this, Captain," Bradley said. "How does someone walk up to a man sitting on a lounge chair on a crowded

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beach, shoot him, and then get away without anyone hearing or seeing anything?"

"He doesn't," Tru said. "Can't be done."

"What about a gun with a silencer?"

"He'd have to swim to shore from somewhere—a boat. Maybe he'd have to wear a wetsuit to swim that far. He'd have to keep the gun dry. After all that, he'd have to be able to shoot the man with no one noticing. Same thing with somebody just walking along the beach. They'd still have to stop by him and shoot him. I don't think it can be done. It's off-season and the beach is not that crowded. But somebody would have to have seen something."

"Well," Bradley said, standing up, "that's what my partner and I are going to try and find out today. Thanks for your time, Captain."

Tru walked Bradley to the door.

"Did you identify the man?" he asked at the door.

"Yes," Bradley said. "His name's Philip Williams. He's retired, living in a condo across the bridge."

"What business was he in?"

"He was a stockbroker, from New York."

Maybe that explained why the two detectives seemed so suspicious of him. He and the dead man were from the same city.

"The name ring a bell?"

"No," Tru said, "never heard of him. Did he have a wife?"

"A wife. And a mistress," Bradley said. "We're looking at both of them. One or both may have a boyfriend."

"I wish you luck."

"We've got to find out who did it in order to find out how," Bradley said. "That's what's driving me nuts. How?"

Tru let the detective out, then retrieved the detective's cup from the living room and put it in the sink. Again, he freshened his own cup, then took it out to the balcony with the binoculars.

He watched the two detectives for a while as they questioned people on the beach. No doubt they'd find some folks who had been there the day before and who'd be there again tomorrow. Regulars who might have noticed something out of the ordinary.

He went back out onto the balcony several times over the next few hours. The detectives were gone when the sun started to set, and as the huge orange ball was slowly swallowed by the water he watched the snack-bar guy close up. Apparently, the gift shop had closed already. Except for the cars belonging to some couples who wanted to watch the sunset, the snack-bar guy's car was the last one in the lot. Slowly, the couples drifted away as the sun disappeared, and then finally the guy came out of the snack bar, locked it, and walked to his car. After that, the beach was empty. Anyone could have come and gone as he pleased. . . .

Anyone.

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5.

Under normal circumstances, Truxton Lewis was an early riser. On this morning, however, he was up before the sun, sitting on the balcony with a jacket on, and the binoculars in his hands. As it started to get light, a car pulled into the parking lot of the public beach where he'd found the body yesterday. He trained the binoculars on the car and watched as the man who worked in the snack bar—and who probably owned it—got out. First to arrive in the morning, last to leave at night. . . .

He went inside and made a phone call.

Later that day the doorbell rang. When he opened it, Detective Bradley was standing there. "Where's your partner?"

"He didn't want to have to come here and tell you that you were right," Bradley said. "Can I come in?"

"Sure."

Tru closed the door and followed the detective into the living room.

"Maybe we should talk about this on the balcony," Bradley said. "Probably fitting."

They stepped out onto the balcony together. Tru didn't have the binoculars, but he could tell from where they were that the snack bar had closed early. He only needed glasses for reading.

"You were right, Captain," Bradley said. "The owner of the snack bar is one Andrew Cranston. He's owned and operated it alone down here for about sixteen years. Everybody on that beach knows him as Andy."

Tru waited for the rest.

"Old Andy lived and worked in New York twenty years ago," Bradley went on. "You spotted what little was left of his New York accent. You've got a good ear."

"Thanks."

"When we approached him," Bradley said, "he denied it, at first, but the more we pushed the weaker his denial became, until he finally spilled it."

"What's his story?"

"He and the dead man were partners on Wall Street years ago. They got into some trouble with the SEC—insider trading, I think. The dead man—Philip Williams—saved himself by rolling over on his partner. Cranston served two years in a country club, came out and spent two more years as an alcoholic. After he dried out, he came down here and he's been here ever since. The other day, who should walk up to his snack bar than his old partner? Retired and moved down here. Some coincidence, huh?"

"Lots of people retire and move down here," Tru said. "Lots of people come here from New York."

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"Yeah, maybe," Bradley said, "but I still say it's a big coincidence."

"So how did he arrange to kill him?"

"Williams recognized him, greeted him like an old friend. And you know what? Cranston knew what he was going to do right away. He claims he had never had a thought of revenge in twenty years, but as soon as Philip Williams came up to his counter he knew he was going to kill him. He went along with the old-friend act, eventually lured him down here early one morning and did what you said."

"He shot him," Tru said, "dragged him out to a lounger before anyone came to the beach, and left him there, looking like he was asleep."

"Right. Nobody noticed him all day. You called it, Captain. How did you do that? From up here with binoculars?"

"I didn't call it," Tru said. "I just happened to notice that he was the first to arrive and the last to leave, and I caught a hint of a New York accent. Also, I remembered that while the victim had been shot in the chest, there was no hole in his jacket. That meant that someone had shot him while the jacket was open, and then zipped it to hide the wound from people on the beach. That was enough for me to call you and just suggest that you check his background."

"And we did," Bradley said. "But I don't know that we could have got Cranston if he didn't confess."

"Well, you said he had no thought of revenge for twenty years," Tru said. "Maybe it was more than he could take."

"You might think that, except for one thing," Bradley said.

"What's that?" Tru asked.

"He left him out in the open, right on the beach where he owned the snack bar. You'd think he would have dumped him someplace out of the way, given his connection with the dead man."

"I was wondering about that, myself," Tru said. "What possessed him to just lay him out there on the beach?"

"I asked him that," Bradley said. "You know what he said?"

"What?"

"He wanted to watch him out there all day, baking in the sun," the detective said. "He said he just wanted to enjoy it as long as he could, before we found him."

"And you did."

"No," Bradley said, "you did, Captain. Another day in the sun and the body would have started to smell, and bloat. We'd have had a panic on the beach on our hands."

Bradley put out his hand and Tru shook it.

"You've been here two days," Bradley said, before he left. "Hate to see what's going to happen when you're here two weeks." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

THE SPIRIT BIRDS

by Clark Howard

Lee Minton flew by commercial jet to Spokane, Washington, then took a commuter flight across the state line to the little regional airport at Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. As he walked into the terminal there, duffel slung over one shoulder, a powerfully built man wearing a Levi's jacket and roughout boots came up to him and said, "Mr. Minton?"

"Yes," said Lee.

"I'm Carl Labow, foreman at Bovill Ranch. Mr. Bovill sent me with the plane to meet you."

"The plane?"

"Yeah. Little four-seat puddle-jumper we keep on the ranch. Saves driving two hundred miles." He quickly looked Lee up and down, with no sign of approval, his leathery face unsmiling, eyes hidden under dark sunglasses. "That all your gear?"

"Yes. My crate of equipment arrive at the ranch?"

"Day before yesterday." Labow bobbed his head. "Follow me."

The foreman led Lee out of the terminal and across the tarmac to an area where private aircraft were parked. When they came to

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a dark blue Mohawk K-2, Labow opened the passenger door for him.

"Just throw your duffel on the rear seat and climb in."

In five minutes, Labow had radioed the tower for clearance, started the twin props, and was speeding down a runway for takeoff. Lee watched the ground drop away below them, and as they gained altitude and flew east he could see far enough ahead in the clear, unpolluted sky to distinguish where the surrounding urban areas started to pare out and the great Coeur d'Alene national forest wilderness began.

By chance, we had scheduled a Clark Howard story for this Readers Award issue before the final tally of votes placed him at the top of the poll. The coincidence is fortuitous, for new readers, who don't yet know Mr. Howard's work, will get a chance to see the kind of talent readers voted for, and those who did vote will have the pleasure of discovering another Howard tale at the same time they read that their ballots secured him '99's award. †

Lee looked younger than his thirty-two years. Unremarkable in appearance, unobtrusive by nature, he was easily unnoticeable, quickly forgotten. Slight of build, he was also deceptively strong enough to have impressed Carl Labow had the foreman suspected as much. They had been airborne for fifteen minutes before Labow spoke again.

"So you're the bird hunter?" he said, making it both a statement and a question.

Lee smiled slowly. "I don't believe I've ever been called a bird *hunter* before," he replied. "But I am an ornithologist. I teach about birds, I study birds, and I sometimes help solve problems that birds create."

"I solve bird problems, too," Labow said with a cool smile, reaching up to touch an overhead rack which held a telescopically equipped rifle.

"Yes, well," Lee said, "in this case, I don't believe your method is acceptable. The birds causing your employer's problem are *Corvidae cryptoleucus*, otherwise known as white-necked ravens. They have recently become protected by law under an amendment to the National Wildlife Protection Act." He fixed Labow in a cautionary stare. "I wouldn't shoot any of them if I were you. It's a federal offense. You could go to jail for it."

Labow grunted derisively. "If I got caught, you mean. Doing something and getting caught are two different things."

"Well, let's hope it's an academic matter, Mr. Labow," Lee said. "Let's hope I can solve the problem without you having to jeopardize your freedom."

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"Yeah, right," said Labow. "Let's hope."

The flight to Bovill Ranch took less than half the time that a drive would have taken, and Labow expertly put the little Mohawk down on a short landing strip a hundred yards in back of the ranch complex and taxied over to a small hangar. Lee saw, sitting outside, the crate of equipment he had shipped ahead. As they climbed down out of the plane, a stocky, white-haired, ruddy-faced man drove up in a Jeep to meet them.

"Nelson Bovill, Mr. Minton," he said, not getting out but extending his hand to Lee. "Glad to see you. Hop in."

Driving toward the main ranch complex, Lee could see that the spread lay in a pastoral valley of sweeping, sloped green meadows and white-fenced pasturage, being grazed upon by thousands of round, white sheep that looked from a distance like large cotton balls with legs. Their savanna of grassland was surrounded on two sides by the soaring Bitterroot mountain range, and on the other two by thick timberland that was split down the middle by a tributary of the Snake River. The sight of it all caused Lee to gape as he surveyed it. That pleased Nelson Bovill.

"Beautiful, isn't it," he said in a voice now softer.

"I've never seen anything like it," Lee admitted.

"I've brought you here to help me save it," Bovill said ominously.

The rancher pulled over at a long barracks-type building that was the ranch bunkhouse, and said to his foreman, "I'll let you get out here, Carl; I'm sure you've got things to do. I'll give our guest the grand tour."

After letting Labow out, Bovill drove Lee all around the extensive ranch complex, showing him up close much of what Lee had seen from a distance as he landed. In a running narration as they went along, Lee was given an overview of sheep ranching, from the placement of irrigation sprinklers which sustained the pastures, to electrical fencing on the perimeter to keep wolves and grizzlies out, to the large stock sheds used for shelter, to the grain bins for storing supplemental feed, all of the details of which, along with numerous others, were carefully logged in Lee Minton's mind like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that gradually formed a picture of the ranch operation. As with everything new that he learned, Lee found it fascinating.

For their final stop on the tour, Bovill drove up to one of the high meadows and parked between the white wooden pasture fences and the electrified chain-link barrier a hundred feet beyond. He led Lee over to the waist-high wooden fence, where they were afforded a close view of some of the grazing sheep. Leaning on the fence with his elbows, Bovill gazed out over the terrain.

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"This land you're standing on, young man, once belonged to Spain, then to Russia, then to England. My great-grandfather came out here when this was all wilderness. This whole valley was all timber, so thick that the sun never hit the ground. My great-grandfather hacked out a clearing all by himself, and built a cabin for his family. He hunted and fished for food, and my great-grandmother started growing garden vegetables where the sunlight had started coming in every day. My great-grandfather made friends with the Shoshone Indians and traded things like homemade candles and ground cornmeal for elk and moose skin to make warm clothes with. My grandfather was born right here in this valley before Idaho even had a name or became a state. As he grew to manhood, an idea came to him. He saw how the bighorn sheep flourished up in the Bitterroot Mountains that you see on two sides of us. He studied them, their eating habits, their mating habits. And he watched my great-grandmother, his mother, cultivate seed flowers as well as vegetables in the soil of this valley. He cut out some of the timber and saw healthy pasture grass come up in its place.

"When he was twenty-one, my grandfather, with my great-grandfather's blessing, left the valley and went down south. By that time, Idaho had become a state. My grandfather stayed away for eleven years. In 1912, when he returned to the valley, he brought with him a wife and a deed from the state capital giving my great-grandfather settler's rights and eventual legal ownership of the valley. And he brought something else, too: a pair of sheep. One of them was a Rambouillet ram that had come from France; the other was a Lincoln ewe from Scotland. Those two sheep were the beginning of the herd you see today on this ranch."

Several of the sheep had come over to where the two men were standing, and Bovill reached down and ruffled their coats as he might pet a house dog.

"We call them Panama sheep now," Bovill continued, "a name my grandfather picked up somewhere. There's been some cross-breeding over the years, of course, by my father when he took over, and by me. But this is the end result: a perfect sheep. As you can see, they're white-faced and hornless. Nearly every part of them is used by mankind in some way. The wool, naturally, is used for clothing and other goods. Pelts are used extensively in bookbinding. The carcass is edible as lamb and mutton. Lanolin, which is grease from the wool, is one of the most common lubricants in the world, for humans as well as machinery. Even the intestines are used in the medical field for surgical stitching. The sheep, Mr. Minton, is just as much a boon to mankind as the cow."

The sun had now fallen beyond the Bitterroots and the warm valley air was cooling.

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"That's the lecture for today," the older man said, smiling. "Let's go down to the house. I've got someone coming for supper that I want you to meet."

The other guest for supper was Andrew Capper, a lean man perhaps a decade older than Lee who had been practicing veterinary medicine in the valley and its environs for twenty years. The three men ate supper, served by Bovill's household staff, at a huge polished cedar table hewed by the hands of Bovill's great-grandfather more than a century earlier.

"I must apologize for the lack of a hostess, gentlemen," the rancher said. "Emily, my wife, is back East helping our daughter prepare for our granddaughter's wedding. I'll be heading back there myself day after tomorrow. Meantime, Lee, I've asked Andrew over to give you a rundown on exactly what our bird problem is."

"You're familiar with ravens, Lee?" asked the vet.

Lee smiled slightly. "Yes. I'm familiar with most birds. I have a doctorate in ornithology."

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't know. So we're both doctors," said Capper. "Good. Are you up on anthrax?"

"Only in the textbook sense. It's not commonly a bird disease."

"Quite true. In reference to Mr. Bovill's problem, however, will you permit me to broaden your textbook knowledge somewhat?"

"By all means," said Lee.

"As you probably know," expounded Capper, "anthrax, as it is called today, is one of the oldest diseases in recorded history. Moses mentions it, although not by its modern name, in the Book of Exodus. Homer has commented on it, Hippocrates, Virgil, numerous others. In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it created plagues in Europe. It occurs throughout our modern world today, primarily in Asia and Africa, but also periodically in South America, Egypt, India, even in Siberia. In the U.S., cases are rare but certainly not absent.

"The most commonly affected animals are cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and mules. Animals affected to a far lesser degree are dogs, cats, and swine. Humans can also contract it. Animals usually acquire the disease from grazing on contaminated pastures or, secondarily, from the consumption of contaminated feed. In humans, it is acquired by handling infected matter—raw meats, for instance—or by the inhalation of spores where wool and hair from animals are processed.

"Symptoms of the condition are, initially, heavy breathing, trembling, and minor convulsions. These are followed in the secondary stage by a rapid rise in body temperature, spasms, and staggering. Finally, extreme cardiac distress and death. All of the

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foregoing phases are quite rapid, usually terminating within three days." Capper sat back and sipped his coffee. "That's anthrax."

"Bring him up to date on my situation, Andrew," the ranch owner requested.

"Of course. About a month ago, several of Mr. Bovill's mature breeding sheep, which are kept in a separate high-grazing pasture, showed signs of respiratory difficulty. When I came out to look at them, I also found some minor tremors and shivering, which is not uncommon with a respiratory condition. But in one of them I detected spasms that warned me that it might be early anthrax. As a precautionary measure, I had Mr. Bovill quarantine that high pasture, and I administered anti-anthrax serum and penicillin. It cleared up the problem in all but the one ewe that was having the spasms. That animal progressed through the secondary stages of anthrax and died. We analyzed the pasture itself and found it to be uncontaminated. Then we inspected the open bins where feed grain is kept for the sheep to eat. That's where we found the anthrax bacteria."

"Tainted feed grain?" asked Lee, frowning. Capper shook his head.

"We cleaned out the grain, sanitized the bins, and refilled them with fresh grain which we analyzed *beforehand* to make certain it was unpolluted in any way. But within seventy-two hours of putting in the clean grain, it was contaminated again. It had infected five more sheep, two of which died in spite of the serum previously administered."

"It's those damned birds," Nelson Bovill said angrily. "They came out of nowhere a couple of months ago, and now they're killing my sheep!"

"The ravens?" Lee said. "I don't understand. They're not carriers of anthrax."

"They're not carriers *themselves,*" Capper said, "But they *can* convey something that is." He paused several beats to let the theory orient in Lee's mind. Then he nailed it down. "We think they're depositing bacteria from their beaks in the grain bins."

"They feed there?" Lee asked at once.

"Daily."

Bovill and Capper both studied Lee Minton as he contemplated the probability of what the veterinarian had put forth. His expression was inscrutable, but his eyes were energized by accelerated reasoning. Lee reached his conclusion within a matter of seconds.

"It's possible. All it would take is a microscopic bit of bacteria. Either on the beak or just inside of it. The organism could be transferred when the bird takes its first bite of grain." He nodded soberly. "Definitely possible, gentlemen."

An imperceptible sense of relief came over Bovill and Capper at

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Lee's endorsement of their theory. Capper knew that ornithologists were passionately protective of all birds, and had conveyed that knowledge to the rancher when they first discussed bringing one in to help with the problem. They had halfway feared that the person might resist imputing any blame at all to the ravens. But Lee had not.

"What do you think the bacillus might be coming from?" Capper asked.

"What kind of game do you have up in the mountains?" Lee asked. Bovill answered. "Everything from squirrels and chipmunks to grizzly bears and bison."

"So there'll be ongoing carcasses," Lee said, "either from animal kills, wildlife illness, or aging. Ravens eat worms, insects, grains, and berries. But, like most birds, they also pick at carcasses. That's probably the answer. An infinitesimal speck of carcass."

"And it's killing my sheep," Nelson Bovill said darkly. "But the federal government tells me I can't kill *them.*"

"They're not killing your sheep intentionally, Mr. Bovill," said Lee. "And you don't have to kill them. I'll take care of them for you."

"How?"

"I'll catch them, cage them, and take them far away from here."

"Can you catch all of them?" Capper asked.

"Very likely. Ravens usually live in flocks of two dozen or less. They mate for life, live for twenty-plus years, and stake out and vigorously defend their territory. If something drives them away—pesticides, for example, or a mean-spirited eagle—they relocate. You said they showed up here a couple of months ago, which means that something drove them from where they previously lived. Now I'll move them someplace else."

"Where?" asked Bovill. Lee shrugged.

"Don't know yet. Glacier National Park over in Montana, maybe. Or the Teton Wilderness Area in Wyoming. I'll contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; they'll pick out a spot where the birds won't be a threat or nuisance to anything."

Bovill rose and from a sideboard produced a decanter of whiskey and three leaded crystal glasses. He poured a shot for each of them.

"I have to tell you, young man, that your being here is a mighty load off my old shoulders. I'm going to see that the university where you teach receives a handsome endowment for recommending you." He raised his glass. "Cheers."

The three men drank, then Capper asked, "When will you get started, Dr. Minton?"

"First thing in the morning," Lee said.

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By eight the next morning, with a canteen of water and a box lunch on the seat beside him, Lee left the ranch complex in a four-wheel-drive open Jeep and drove up the dirt mountain trail nearest to the feed bin that had been contaminated. There was a heavy, somehow cold silence in the thick forest that ringed the base of the Bitterroots. The air was pungent with the scent of raw pine. Now and then, as the trail meandered, it would edge along the low bank of a pristine stream that was a tributary of the legendary Snake River. At one point, about four miles along, the road dipped down to a flood plain and Lee saw a bison trail. Another couple of miles and he saw grizzly tracks in some mud leading up into the rocks. He was able to recognize most of what he saw from summers spent in the Forest Service during seven years of college earning his degrees.

He was seven miles from the ranch when he saw his first ravens. There were half a dozen of them, hunched in a row along a pine branch, resting quietly, observing the road. Lee pulled over and shut off the engine. Purposely, he remained behind the wheel for several minutes, doing nothing except sitting there. He did not look over at the ravens, but he knew they were looking at him.

After what he considered a suitable length of time to kindle their curiosity, Lee, with measured casualness, got out of the vehicle and began to walk around, here and there, in a loose circle, looking down at the ground, never up at the ravens. Now and again, when he was close enough to the tree they were in, he would pause, eyes still cast downward, and listen intently. A slight smile spread on his lips as he heard their soft patter, a sound not entirely unlike a human gargling very, very softly.

Walking back to the Jeep, Lee removed the cap of the canteen, drank a little water, swished it around in his mouth, and spat it onto the ground. Then he opened the box lunch, got a slice of bread from one of the sandwiches, and pretended to munch on it as he walked away, carrying the box lunch with him.

Lee walked away from the mountain range, away from where the forest became thicker and deeper. He walked in the direction in which he knew the tributary stream had cut away, making a path for himself through thinning pines, marking it occasionally with an arrow scraped into the forest floor that pointed back toward the Jeep. Overhead, above the tall pines through which he walked, Lee heard a familiar cry: *tok! tok! tok!* It told him that the ravens were following him.

Presently, Lee walked out of the trees onto the edge of a broad meadow of thick scrub grass. Picking out a low knoll where the elevation of the land dropped to form a shallow gully, he walked over and sat down in a position facing the trees. From somewhere high up, he heard the flight cry again: *tok! tok! tok!*

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As nonchalantly as his methodical scientific mind would allow him to seem, Lee opened the box lunch again and took out another slice of bread. As he began to eat, his eyes swept the upper tree line, scanning for the birds. He knew they would be together; they had seen him together, and followed him together, so now they would be watching him together. Ravens were like that, cliquish.

It took Lee several moments of covert searching before he finally discerned among the brown and green hues of the forest a patch of bluish-purplish iridescence that told him the ravens were once again hunched together on a limb, higher this time, observing him. Finishing the second slice of bread, Lee closed the box, left it there on the ground, and walked back to the Jeep.

Ornithologist one, ravens zero, he thought.

That afternoon, out behind the main ranch house, Lee used a crowbar to pry open the wooden crate he had shipped ahead. The foreman, Carl Labow, and several of the ranch hands watched him curiously. When he had one side pried loose, Lee lowered it to the ground, revealing inside, among several smaller wooden cartons, a gleaming, chrome-plated, tubular device mounted on rubber tires that looked like exactly what it was: a modified, scaled-down version of a cannon.

"What the hell," said Carl Labow. "I thought you said it was against the law to kill them birds. Looks to me like you're getting ready to blow them to pieces."

"Not with this," Lee said.

Grasping a handle at the front of the barrel, Lee pulled the device out of the crate onto the wooden side lying on the ground. Because of its exact placement on the axle, and the perfect balance that created, together with ball bearings in the wheel connections, it moved easily and silently. Labow and the other men gathered around to study it as Lee pried open one of the smaller cartons inside. From it, he removed a precisely rolled net of industrial-grade nylon.

"That cannon," he told the men, "fires this net. When aimed correctly, it projects the rolled netting out in a spiraling motion like a speeding bullet. The spiraling effect causes the netting to unroll and spread out in flight. At the same time, powdered lead sewn into the seams along each side pulls it to the ground." He laid the netting carefully over the barrel. "When that net is fired at a height of ten feet over a flock of birds on the ground, none of them will be able to achieve flight. They will be captured, completely unharmed."

"I'll be damned," one of the ranch hands muttered quietly.

"And this," Lee continued, prying open another of the smaller cartons, "is what I transport them in." He pulled out a flat metal

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object that looked like a folding grocery cart, and expertly expanded it into a square measuring three feet on all sides, locked its corners in place, and produced a cage. "Assuming an average size and weight of four pounds per raven, I can transport two dozen of them in the six collapsible cages I've brought. Mr. Bovill is going to provide one of your flatbed trucks for me to take them to the Coeur d'Alene airport to be flown to wherever they're to be relocated."

Carl Labow leaned one shoulder against the big packing crate. "Seems to me," he said, thumbing a stick match to light a cigarette, "a whole hell of a lot of trouble to go to for a bunch of dumb birds that a few rifle bullets would take care of."

"Except this way is legal and rifle bullets aren't," Lee replied. As he turned away from Labow, he quietly added, "And those birds are probably a lot smarter than you are, too."

Labow grabbed Lee by one shoulder and spun him around. "What'd you say?" he demanded, dropping his cigarette.

"I was merely commenting that ravens are by no means dumb," Lee said. "They have the most highly developed brain of any bird in the world."

"You said them birds was smarter than *me,"* Labow accused.

"That was just a figure of speech—"

"Well, I don't *like* figures of speech," the burly foreman snarled, grabbing the front of Lee's shirt with both hands and jerking him forward.

Without changing expression, Lee reached up with both hands and seized Labow's wrists. Slowly tightening his grip, with a physical strength previously unrevealed and completely unsuspected, he effectively closed off the blood supply to Labow's hands and pressed down on the carpal nerves with each of his thumbs, shooting a bolt of pain all the way up to both of Labow's shoulders. Labow did not cry out, but his face turned beet red.

"I don't like being manhandled," Lee said with a cold calmness. "If I offended you, I apologize. I'll be out of here in a few days. In the meantime, let's try to get along, shall we?"

"Yeah, sure," Labow responded tightly. After a quick glance at his men, he added, "I accept your apology."

Both men released their grips. Lee backed off a couple of steps and resumed uncrating his equipment. As he did, Nelson Bovill came walking out from the main house. "That the contraption you told me about on the telephone?" he asked.

"That's it," said Lee.

"You sure it'll work?"

"I'm sure. I've even picked the spot to use it: a meadow just off the road about seven miles up the trail behind the feed bin that was contaminated."

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"How long you figure it'll take you?"

"Depends on how intelligent these particular birds are," Lee replied, resisting an urge to glance at Labow. "But no more than a week, I shouldn't think."

"Well, good luck then," Bovill said, extending a hand. "As I mentioned, I'll be leaving early in the morning to fly back East to join my wife for our granddaughter's wedding. Then my wife and I are going down to Florida to visit her brother for a spell. Carl, my foreman, will be in charge of the place while I'm gone. Any problems come up, he'll know how to reach me."

Lee shook hands with the ranch owner and watched as he walked back to the house. Before resuming the uncrating of his equipment, he looked over at Labow. The stocky foreman was looking back at him. There was a nasty smirk on his face.

The next morning, Lee drove back up to where he had marked a tree at the place he parked the Jeep the previous day. He had another box lunch, which he again carried with him when he walked out to the meadow. Although he did not see the ravens this time, he did detect their muted gargling patter, which told him they were there, hunched high up somewhere, and that they had seen him.

Reaching the meadow, at the spot where he had sat the previous day, Lee found the lunch he had left completely gone, and the box it had been in torn, clawed, and pecked to pieces, scattered about as if shredded by a madman. Untidy bunch, aren't you? Lee thought. No table manners at all.

He set the new box on the ground and went about tidying up the formerly pristine meadow, picking up the litter left by the birds, stuffing it into his pockets for later disposal. Finishing that, he sat again where he had sat before, and again took from the box a slice of bread to eat. Knowing the birds, because of their fearlessness, would be building up a fretting impatience, he took his time, even resting his head back in the shallow gully and closing his eyes for a few minutes to enjoy the utter peace and solitude of the high mountain meadow.

When he decided that he had annoyed the ravens enough, Lee rose and headed back through the pines to the Jeep, once again leaving the box lunch behind. At the Jeep, he removed a tarpaulin from a cargo deck formed by folding down the rear bench seat. Tied to the inside panels were the net cannon, its wheel assembly, the rolled nylon netting, explosive charges to fire the cannon, and the folded cages in which to secure the captured birds. Unlashing the wheel assembly first, Lee let it to the ground, then hoisted the heavy cannon barrel onto it, bolted it in place, and with a rope loop pulled it off the road and into the trees.

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Reaching the edge of the meadow with the cannon, Lee saw that there were six ravens now on the ground, attacking the box to get at the food inside. At the sight and sound of him, the birds paused in their work, studied him, decided he was not close enough to pose a danger, and resumed their activity with several low cries of *quork, quork, quork!*

After positioning the cannon where its field of fire would cover a wide span of meadow between the tree line and the gully where he was leaving the food, Lee made two trips back to the Jeep to carry the other items and the tarp out to the cannon. When he had everything in one place, he used the tarp to cover it, hammering wooden pegs through the davits in the canvas seams to fasten it securely to the forest floor. He sprayed the outside of the tarp with a chemical scent that was repugnant to wild animals, but which human olfactory senses could not detect.

Before he left, Lee paused to look out at the ravens. Once again, they had ripped the box to shreds and were serenely consuming its contents. He smiled. Enjoy it while you can, my little gluttons, he thought. Next week you'll be back to foraging for worms again.

On the third day, Lee brought more food, in two boxes this time, and without bothering to vex the ravens at length with his presence, simply cleaned up the previous day's litter and left the boxes on the ground—but this time about four feet closer to the tree line where the cannon was positioned. Sitting down with his back to a tree, he watched as the ravens came to eat, singly, in pairs, in threes, until there were, at final count, thirteen of them lunching together over two destroyed boxes.

Good, thought Lee. Come one, come all. Let's see how many you've got in your happy flock.

On day four, Lee brought three boxes, put them several feet closer to the trees, and attracted seventeen birds. He was, he felt, nearing the end of his bait phase. This was not an unusually large flock, he decided, based on the number that had shown up that fourth day. There were probably twelve, perhaps fourteen, mature birds, another four to eight young ones. Once he netted all of the mature ones, the young ones would fly down and hunch on the cages to be with the rest of the flock. Those could easily be caught with hand nets; they practically surrendered. There would, of course, be some casualties: babies and unhatched eggs left in the unprotected nests. Those would be eaten by forest predators. That was the part that Lee hated. But, he reasoned, it was better than having the entire flock wasted by rifle fire.

Tomorrow, he thought, would probably be the day he did the netting. If fourteen mature ravens showed up to eat, and six or

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more smaller ones, he would assume he had most of the flock and he would take them. He looked forward to finishing the job.

On day five, Lee drove up with four boxes filled not only with sandwiches, but also raw bacon and pork sausage, a variety of raw, unsalted seeds, and a selection of fresh berries. Such an assortment of delicacies would enhance their appetites, he knew, while decreasing their defensive alertness. He would put the bait halfway between the gully and the tree line, giving him a good target area. It would, he was sure, be an easy netting.

But when he reached the edge of the meadow, carrying the four boxes, he stopped abruptly in his tracks at the sight of an old, very old, bright red pickup truck parked on the opposite side of the gully. Next to it, in a rocking chair no less, sat an old, very old, Indian man. And off to the side, baseball gloves on their hands, two lean, younger Indians, long black hair flowing behind them, were engaged in a vigorous game of hardball catch. The meadow around them had already been cleaned up of litter.

Lee stood with mouth agape, unable at first to comprehend the incredible scene before him. He had never seen a living creature on the meadow except the ravens, and now this—this *ethereal* scene was displayed before him without warning and in complete unlikeliness. He was frozen in disbelief.

The old Indian in the rocking chair waved and gestured for Lee to come over. Dumbfounded, Lee placed the boxes of food on the ground and walked out to the edge of the gully. The two younger Indians, both wearing jeans and sweatshirts, stopped playing and came over to stand next to the rocking chair. One of them, Lee saw when he got closer, was a boy of about twelve, but the other—taller, and as lean as the boy except around the hips—was a young woman of perhaps twenty. Both she and the boy had smooth skin the color of butter toffee, while the old man in the rocking chair had a face and hands that looked like old, very old, saddle leather.

"Come over," the old man called. "We will not harm you."

Smiling slightly at such reassurance, Lee walked to where the gully was narrowest and stepped across it. When he stood before the trio, the old man nodded to the young woman.

"You may introduce me," he said, adding quickly, "with full title."

"This is Camas," the young woman presented him. "He is the hereditary chief of the great Northern Shoshone mounted warriors."

"Good," said Camas. "And yourselves."

"I am Grace Camas," she said, "and this is my brother, Charley Camas. We are the great-grandchildren of Camas."

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They all stared at Lee, waiting. After a long moment, he gathered his wits and said, "Oh. I'm sorry. My name is Lee Minton."

"I am pleased to meet you, Leeminton," said Camas. "Do you have any whiskey?" His great-granddaughter shot him a cross look.

"No, sir, I don't. I'm sorry."

"I also am sorry," the old Indian acknowledged. "Now we must talk without it. Do you know why I have waited for you on this meadow, Leeminton?"

"No, sir, I don't." Lee glanced self-consciously at Grace Camas. Her eyes, as dark as her hair, deep-socketed above high, sharp cheeks, were almost celestial in the way they reflected darts of sunlight. Lee had to tear his attention away from them.

"I have waited here," Camas explained, "to ask why you are baiting the spirit birds?"

"Spirit birds?"

"Yes. The black ravens with white throats. Do you mean to kill them, Leeminton?"

"No, of course not," Lee replied, taken aback. "I don't kill birds. I study them. And teach about them."

"You are a teacher?"

"Yes."

"My great-granddaughter will be a teacher someday," he said proudly, smiling at Grace. "But she will teach about words and numbers, not about birds."

"Really?" Lee looked at Grace with increased interest. But he was immediately drawn back to her great-grandfather. "Why do you call the ravens 'spirit birds'?" he asked.

"Because they are the spirit of a Shoshone woman who brought great pride and honor to her people. Her name was Sacajawea." He pronounced it Sah-*kah*-jah-weea. "In English it means 'Bird Woman.'"

Grace took a folded white handkerchief from her jeans pocket and patted perspiration from the old man's forehead. "The sun rises hot, Great-grandfather," she said formally. "You have been out here too long."

"This matter must be resolved," Camas said.

"Not in the hot sun," Grace replied firmly.

"This is serious," the old man insisted.

"So is your high blood pressure." She looked at Lee. "Perhaps Mr. Lee Minton can be persuaded to visit you at the house, when the day is cooler."

"Would you do me that honor, Leeminton?" Camas asked.

"Of course."

"And you will do nothing to the birds until after we talk."

"Not if you don't want me to."

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"It is agreed, then."

Grace gestured to Charley, and the younger brother tossed the two baseball gloves and the ball into the bed of the pickup and stepped over to help his sister assist their great-grandfather from the rocking chair up into the cab of the old truck. Then Charley put the rocking chair into the truck bed also.

"How do I find your house?" Lee asked Grace.

"Come back here at four o'clock," Grace said. "I'll meet you and take you there."

Lee watched her get behind the wheel, start the truck, and drive off across the meadow. Incredible, he thought—and was immediately struck by the fact that he was applying the word not only to the encounter, but to the woman as well.

Returning to where he had left the boxes of food, he moved them to where he had earlier planned, about halfway between the gully and the tree line. As he walked back to the trees, he heard above him a cacophony of raven gargling sounds, louder than usual now because of the extended wait to which they had been subjected. Before he was too far into the trees, Lee heard a clamor of flapping wings and saw the birds alighting and beginning to attack the boxes. Quickly he counted them. Nineteen.

Damn, he thought. That might be the entire flock. But he would get them the following day, he was certain of it.

Almost certain anyway, he thought, the old Indian's face still fresh in his mind.

Back at the ranch, Labow came over to Lee when he parked the Jeep. "Thought you was going to catch them birds today," he confronted him.

"I planned to," Lee said, "but there was an old Indian out on the meadow—"

"Camas? Was that old fool out there?" he asked hotly.

"Yes, he was."

"He's been told to keep off that meadow and stay on his own side of the mountain. That meadow belongs to Bovill Ranch."

"A meadow that high? You can't use it for grazing, can you?"

"Don't matter. It's ours." He jabbed a nicotine-stained finger at Lee. "You let me know if you see him up there tomorrow, hear?"

"Sure," Lee replied, knowing he would do no such thing.

"And you'd do well not to have nothin' to do with that redskin," Labow added warningly. "He's crazy and he's a born troublemaker. I was you, I'd steer clear of him."

"Okay," Lee said, making his tone agreeable. "Thanks for the tip."

Labow started to walk away, then turned back. "Was that old man's granddaughter up there with him? Gal name of Grace?"

"Yes."

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"Has she filled out any?" Labow asked lecherously. "You know, up around the chest?"

"I wouldn't know." Lee kept his voice even. "I never saw her before."

Labow wet his lips. "Just wondering. Couple of the boys and me been thinking now and again about paying her a visit some night." He winked at Lee and smiled licentiously. "Ain't nothing like a hot young squaw."

"I'll bet," Lee smiled back. Low-life, ignorant asshole, he thought.

After Labow left, Lee went into the main house and found the cook in the kitchen rolling biscuit dough, talking to the housekeeper, who was folding napkins at the table.

"Mind if I get a cup of coffee to take upstairs?" he asked.

"He'p yourself," said the cook. Conversation ceased while Lee got a mug and drew coffee from a large urn on the counter.

"Thanks," he said. Leaving the kitchen, he paused long enough to hear the conversation resume.

Before going upstairs to the guest room he occupied, Lee set the mug down and slipped quietly into Nelson Bovill's study. Behind the ranch owner's fully stocked bar, he found an assortment of bottles. Quickly choosing a pint of blackberry brandy, he concealed it inside his shirt. Then he retrieved his mug of coffee and continued upstairs.

At three o'clock, Lee left the house, casually got into the Jeep, and drove off. Two ranch hands observed him, but he merely smiled and waved as if he were doing nothing unusual. He was sure, however, that his departure would be reported to Labow.

He got up to the high meadow early, but found Grace already there, cleaning up the litter left by the ravens that morning.

"Hey, this is my job," he said, falling in beside her.

She shook her head.

"Everybody's job," she told him. "Because the meadow belongs to everybody."

"Nelson Bovill believes that it belongs to him."

"Bovill," Grace said disdainfully, "believes that the sky is his." She paused to study him. "Did he bring you here?"

"Yes. The ravens may be contaminating his sheep feed with bits of carcass meat. He can't kill them because they're protected by federal wildlife laws. I was hired to net and relocate them."

She nodded and they resumed picking up the litter. When they were finished, Grace tossed the bag of waste into the bed of the old pickup and the two of them got in. "We live around the mountain from Bovill," she said. "There's a grade with a dirt road the other side of the meadow."

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As they drove across the meadow, Lee turned slightly in his seat to look at her. "You're going to be a teacher?" he asked.

She nodded, "Someday. I finished three years on a scholarship, but then my mother passed away and I had to return home to take care of my great-grandfather and my brother."

"That's too bad."

"No, it isn't too bad," she said, with a hint of peevishness. "I am glad to be able to care for them. Wouldn't you take care of your great-grandfather and brother?"

"I don't know," Lee answered honestly. "I don't know how I'd feel about relatives. I grew up in a Catholic orphanage in Arizona. That's where I learned to love birds: out on the desert around the orphanage."

They reached the far side of the meadow, and Grace started the old truck carefully down a winding grade. At some places it looked so narrow that Lee doubted the tires on one side were even completely on the road. But the young Shoshone woman handled the vehicle with precision and confidence. She was wearing a sleeveless vest now, and Lee was fascinated by the lissome beauty of her arms and hands as she manipulated the steering wheel.

When they reached a lower plateau where the road widened and leveled out, Lee asked, "Is your great-grandfather really a chief of your tribe?"

"Technically, yes. A war chief," said Grace. "It's a hollow title in this modern time, with no political or other stature. But once it was very meaningful." She glanced at him. "Would you like to know how he became a war chief?"

"Very much," Lee told her. He had reached the point where he would have listened to anything she said just to be able to keep looking at her.

"About seventy-five years ago," Grace said, "the Bovill herd was wiped out by some kind of sheep tongue disease. The family was desperate to survive, so they led their ranch hands up the mountain to hunt bighorn sheep, which was not illegal at the time. Many men of our tribe hunted bighorn back then also. The Shoshone used bighorn sheep like the Sioux and Cheyenne used the buffalo: for food, clothing, shelter, many things. No part of the animal was wasted. But the Bovill hunters only wanted the wool and the meat. They set up a slaughterhouse down at the ranch to burn and boil away everything else. My great-grandfather says that the stench filled the valleys for miles around.

"But it wasn't only how they used the sheep," she emphasized, "it was how many they took. Where a Shoshone might take one or two a month for subsistence, the ranch needed a hundred or more every day. Soon there were none left for Shoshone families. At that time, there was no war chief of the tribe because there had

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been peace between Shoshones and the white people for many years, ever since these mountains and their valleys had become part of the United States, part of Idaho. But there was a man named Washatikne, whose grandmother had been one of the wives of Chief Washakie, a great and revered Shoshone leader. The grandson, Washatikne, proclaimed himself war chief and summoned warriors of the tribe to follow him in an attack on the Bovill ranch. Only a few young men responded to the call—four, to be exact—and one boy, who was just thirteen. Ordinarily, Washatikne would not have allowed the boy to go because of his youth, but he wanted to humiliate the men who had not answered his call, so the boy went."

"That boy was Camas?" Lee asked, as the fact dawned on him.

"Yes. He and the four young men, led by Washatikne, armed only with war clubs and lances, attacked the ranch one morning after the hunting parties had left. They burned down the slaughterhouse and the bunkhouse, and three white men died in the fires. All of the raiding party were caught and put on trial. The leader and one other were hanged. Three young men went to prison for life. Camas, because of his age, was kept in jail until he was eighteen, then released." Grace sighed quietly.

"One by one," she finished the story, "the three in prison grew old and died. When that happened, Camas became the last Shoshone male to have participated in a battle with the white man. He therefore became the linear war chief of the tribe." She cast a somewhat apprehensive glance at Lee. "I'm afraid he takes the position very seriously. Just as he does the return of the spirit birds. And he's very old. If you could remember that when you're talking to him . . ." She let her words trail off.

"I will," Lee assured her. "I will treat your great-grandfather with the utmost respect."

Grace Camas smiled gratefully at him.

The house they lived in was constructed of thick, unfinished timbers on a rock-and-lime-mortar foundation, set in a cul-de-sac of half a dozen similar houses situated some fifty yards back off the road that wound down that side of the mountain. None of the dwellings was fenced in any way, so they had no individual yards, yet because their location was on an ample grassy meadow of land, they in fact shared a spacious common tract on which Lee, as the old pickup arrived, saw children playing, horses, sheep, and milk cows grazing, and a few old people strolling and talking. The sun had gone down and smoke was beginning to swirl from stovepipes and chimneys. In front of the house where Grace parked, her brother was engaged in pitching practice with another

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Indian boy. Camas sat on the porch in his rocker, giving instructions.

"Tighten up on the knuckle ball," he was saying as Grace and Lee got out of the truck. "It's breaking too soon." When he saw Lee, he smiled and greeted, "Leeminton, my friend, how are you?" as if he knew him well and had not seen him for weeks. "Come, sit with me." He gestured to a straight chair next to him.

"I'll go start supper," Grace said as Lee sat down. "You'll eat with us?"

"Sure," Lee replied. "Thanks." His eyes met hers and held for a warm instant. As she was going inside, Grace called to her brother in the yard, "Charley, go get Domino!"

"Okay!" the boy yelled back, dropping his baseball glove and running over to a pinto mare grazing nearby. Lee watched in admiration as Charley leaped onto the horse and rode her bareback to someplace behind the house. Almost at once, he came running back out front to retrieve his glove and resume throwing the ball.

"We must discuss the spirit birds, Leeminton," said Camas.

"First, I have something for you," Lee told him. From inside his shirt he produced the pint of blackberry brandy and twisted open its cap. With a furtive glance toward the screen door through which his great-granddaughter had just gone, Camas removed the cap and took a long swallow.

"Aaaahhh," he smacked his lips. "That is very good. Where did you get it?"

"I stole it from Nelson Bovill."

Camas smiled. "I knew when I met you this afternoon that you were an admirable young man. He handed the bottle to Lee, who took a sip and passed it back.

"Tell me about the ravens," Lee said. "Tell me about the woman you said was the reason you called them spirit birds."

"Sacajawea, the Bird Woman," Camas replied. "She was given the name 'Bird Girl' as a child, because she, like you, Leeminton, studied the birds. She watched them and listened to them and learned their ways. Shoshone medicine men believed that she was gifted and, like a bird, knew when storms were coming. She was selected to one day become a tribal holy woman. But that was not to be, not for many years," he said sadly, taking another swallow of brandy.

"What happened to her?" Lee asked.

"When she was twelve years old, while the Shoshone men were out hunting bighorn sheep for the winter, a raiding party from the Minnetarees sacked the village and stole several women and children. Bird Girl was among those stolen. She was taken east to the great plains, and there she was sold to the Mandans, who were

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part of the Sioux nation. She lived with the Mandans on the upper Missouri River, was treated well by them, and grew to become a beautiful young woman. When the explorers Lewis and Clark arrived looking for a route to the Pacific Ocean, they learned of the gift that Bird Woman, as she had come to be called, had for sensing direction as a flying bird does. So they asked the Mandans if they would allow her to accompany them as a guide across the Great Divide to the ocean, and then be returned to her own people on the trip back. Because the Mandans were a decent and civilized tribe, they agreed. When Bird Woman was finally reunited with the Shoshones, she at last became a holy woman." He took another swallow. "The symbol for Sacajawea is a black raven with a white throat. That is her spirit. As war chief of the Shoshones, I am bound by the blood of my ancestors to protect them. That is why, Leeminton, if you try to harm them, I will have to kill you."

"I understand," said Lee. "But I am not here to harm the spirit birds. I am here to *save* them from harm." He explained to Camas what was happening to the feed grain on the Bovill ranch, as well as why he himself had been brought there, and what he intended to do, and how. Camas shook his head solemnly.

"Bovill must have done something very bad for the Great One to have sent the spirit birds to punish him. Tell me, Leeminton, where would you take the spirit birds if I did not kill you?"

"To a place where they could be wild and free, away from people, away from ranches. A place where they would be protected."

"Who would protect them?"

"The government."

"Ah, the government." His eyes twinkled. "The government is very reliable," he said wryly, and took another drink. "This place where you would take them, is it a place where my great-granddaughter could drive me to visit once before I die, to see for myself that the spirit birds are all right?"

"Yes." A sudden thought occurred to Lee. "I might even take you with me to release them, if you wanted to come."

"That is a fine idea." He looked at the bottle of brandy in his hand. "Bovill has very good brandy. It is a shame he is so evil."

From inside the house, Grace called, "Charley, come wash for supper!"

Charley and his friend waved goodbye and he came onto the porch. He saw Camas cap the brandy bottle and put it under his shirt.

"Say nothing to your sister about this gift," the old man cautioned. "I do not wish to be nagged tonight."

"Okay, Great-grandfather," Charley replied amiably. "You eating with us, Leeminton?" he asked.

"Yes. Say, I was watching you out there. You've got a good arm."

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"I'd like to pitch in the majors someday," the boy said.

"What's your favorite team?"

"Who do you think, Leeminton?" Charley asked drily. "Cleveland." He went on into the house.

"Of course," Lee said, abashed. "The Indians."

"Come," said Camas, rising, "let's eat. My great-granddaughter is a fine cook, as well as a very pretty and healthy woman, with good teeth. Are you married, Leeminton?"

The night was bright with full moonlight, the vast spread of sky over the Bitterroots resplendent with shimmering stars, when Grace drove Lee back across the high meadow to his Jeep.

"I've never seen a sky so imposing," he said quietly. "Not even in the desert.

"It's a dreamer's sky," said Grace.

"What's that?"

"The kind of sky where you lie in the back of a pickup and look up at it and dream while you're still awake. Haven't you ever done it?"

"No."

"Would you like to?"

"Yes."

Grace got a thick quilt from behind the seat and spread it out in the truck bed. They climbed in and lay on their backs, side by side, not touching but only inches between them.

"Your great-grandfather tells me that you have good teeth," Lee said.

Grace laughed softly. "Camas is incorrigible. He says he cannot die with his mind at peace unless I am married first. Last spring he tried to pawn me off on the driver of the school bus that picks up the children. He used Charley as a go-between."

"Shouldn't be too hard to get rid of you," Lee observed. "Women with good teeth aren't that easy to find."

"Yeah, right," she said, jabbing him with her elbow. "Did you and Camas reach a compromise on the ravens?"

"I think so. I said I'd net them and then let him come see the place where I let them go. It won't be far: Montana or Wyoming, I imagine." After a pause, he asked, "Would he really have killed me over this?"

Grace sighed pensively. "He might have tried. Indians who reach a certain age don't think like other people. The old days are never far below the surface of their minds. But I think he'll be reasonable about it. He likes you, and he trusts you."

"What about you?" he asked. "Do you like me?"

"I'm not sure," she replied impishly. "How are your teeth?"

Now Lee laughed. "Very good, as a matter of fact. Kids who

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grow up in Catholic orphanages always have good teeth. The nuns see to it."

"Were you lonely as a child?" Grace asked gently.

"No, I don't think so. I had never had a family. What you've never had, you don't really miss. And the orphanage was a good place, not like a lot of people think they are." Lee turned onto his side and propped his head up. "Were you lonely as a child?"

"No," she said simply.

"Are you lonely as a woman?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she said again, just as simply.

Her face was bathed in moonlight, sable eyes fixed frankly on him, moist, unpainted lips parted scantly. Leaning down, Lee kissed her, tenderly, almost reverently. She tasted like he imagined fresh dew would taste. As he moved his lips away, he felt one of her hands go behind his head and gently pull him back. Their second kiss was longer, less tender, more ardent, as they both felt stirrings. Lee slipped his arms under her and gathered her up to him. Through the clothing that separated their bodies, he felt her young breasts shudder. Their kiss became drawn out and delicious. Then she delicately pulled away.

"I cannot make love with you," she said, becoming subdued.

"Don't you want to?"

"Yes. But let me explain. It is complicated. When I get back home tonight, Camas will ask me if I made love with you. I cannot lie to him; to lie would be to dishonor him. If I make love with you, I would have to tell him. Then he would say I was brazen and had brought disesteem to his family. But if I do not make love with you, I can truthfully tell him no. Then he will first praise me for being virtuous, but later he will begin to criticize me for being unresponsive to a prospective husband of whom he has already expressed approval. So I cannot make love with you—tonight."

Lee rolled onto his back again, feeling his urgings subside. He held one of her hands to his lips and kissed her fingertips. "Tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Yes." She lay her head on his chest.

They looked up in silence at the dreamer's sky for a while longer.

The next morning, Lee sat alone at the tree line, sipping hot, black coffee from a thermos, watching the morning sun spread its warmth over the high meadow that it nourished. Behind him, in the shadows of the pines, the cannon was ready, its rolled netting as snug in its bore as an artillery shell, its firing charge loaded, trigger-timing mechanism engaged, elevation set, and target area precisely measured. Dead-center of the target area had been paced off by Lee when he first got there, and a broken branch was stuck in the ground to mark it.

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Now Lee waited, white boxes of bait food beside him, daydreaming about Grace Camas, letting the minutes pass until the meadow grass was warm enough not to chill the ravens when they were snared to it, unable to fly up to their usual place above the cold earth. He would be glad to have the ravens contained and ready to move. There had been a scene with Labow when Lee had returned late the previous night.

"You've been here a week," the surly foreman accused, "and all you've done that I can see is feed them damn birds every day. When you going to finish what you been brought here to do?"

Tomorrow, Lee had assured him. Tomorrow he would net and cage them. It was the same assurance he had given Camas, except that he had also promised to then return and discuss with the old Indian the final disposition of the birds.

Now tomorrow was here. It was today.

With deliberateness, Lee put his thermos aside and rose to carry the white boxes out to the stake marker. Knowing that the ravens would be watching and waiting, he set the boxes, four this time, nicely spaced around the center of the target area so that all the birds would have room to get at the food without crowding. He wanted them to be comfortable, focused on eating, as unvigilant as they could be. With the bait in place, he returned to the trees, this time going into the shadows where the cannon was positioned.

Only minutes after Lee left the boxes, the ravens began arriving. Three large ones first, the most mature males, Lee guessed. They began cautiously to peck and claw at the boxes, pausing every few seconds to look around for signs of anything untoward: a human, a larger bird, some four-legged predator. But nothing caused them apprehension, and soon three others touched down in a fluttering of black wings. Presently the tops and sides of the boxes were pecked and clawed apart and access to the food was accomplished. Almost at once, half a dozen other birds alighted and beaked their way to the food. The females, Lee thought. The call of *tok! tok! tok!* sounded from them, and within seconds a line of eight younger birds flew down from high in the pines and dispersed themselves randomly into the bevy in a manner in which only young birds would.

Twenty, Lee thought, one thumb on the firing mechanism of the cannon. He waited another full minute, in case there were stragglers. But when no others came, he thought: *That's the main flock.*

His thumb went down, firing the cannon.

It did not make a loud noise, comparatively, not like an ordnance cannon discharging an explosive shell; rather, there was a sharp, quick *crack!* as if a thick book had been dropped onto a hardwood floor; that followed by a *whoooosh* noise like an air tunnel opening. Before these sounds even fully diminished, the white

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nylon net had cascaded out over the target area of the meadow in a willowy web and was being pulled to the ground by its weighted seam as the startled birds attempted to take flight. Not one of them made it. They were gently but effectively held in place.

A great cacophony of indignant *quorks* pierced the quiet of the meadow and Lee turned, laid aside a pair of high-cuffed canvas gloves he would use to keep from being pecked bloody as he handled the birds, and began methodically unfolding the metal cages.

It was noon when Lee arrived back at the ranch and found Labow waiting for him.

"Get them damned birds all caged?" he asked.

"All caged," Lee confirmed. "Can I get a couple of men to help me bring them down?"

"Nobody around right now," Labow said, "but I've got some boys mending fence on one of the low meadows. I'll drive over and get a couple of 'em while you unload your gear."

"Appreciate it," Lee nodded. He watched curiously as Labow walked away, wondering why the irascible foreman was suddenly so agreeable. Maybe he just wants to get me out of here, he thought. As Labow drove away in his own Jeep, Lee began unloading the cannon and other equipment he had brought down.

As he worked, moving things from the Jeep back into the open shipping crate, Lee's mind drifted to thoughts of Grace and her soft, nectared lips, gentle, lingering fingertips, slim, supple body, and the whispered promises she made when they parted. Lee had never been one to have freewheeling relationships with women. Most of his encounters had been of mild intensity, short duration, and cordial conclusion. And, without exception, those experiences had been primarily physical, unemotional except for the immediate need of both participants. But with Grace, a heightened feeling had come over him, a sudden hunger for more than he had previously wanted, a yearning to merge what was her with what was him, not just to use but to *keep*. He wondered, distractedly, if he was in love. If so, he then thought, amused, at least it was a woman who had good teeth.

It took him an hour to get everything back properly into the crate and the open panel nailed up. Just as he finished, he heard a Jeep and looked around to see Labow, with two passengers, turn into the main ranch area from what looked to Lee like the direction of a high meadow road. Frowning, he recalled the foreman saying he was going to a *low* meadow—

Screeching to a halt, Labow and the two ranch hands leaped out. "Max, you and Wally get your rifles," the foreman ordered. "Get mine too." He turned to Lee. "Your plan didn't work, mister. There's three ravens in the feed bin again!"

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"What?" Lee said in disbelief.

"See for yourself," Labow growled, snatching a pair of binoculars from under the seat of the Jeep and thrusting them at Lee.

Holding them to his eyes, quickly adjusting the focusing wheel, Lee trained the glasses on the feed bin where anthrax bacteria had been found. Just as Labow had said, three large ravens were nonchalantly picking at the grain. Dismayed, Lee lowered the binoculars.

"I don't understand," he said, confounded. "Those are mature birds. There's no way they wouldn't have been with the flock—"

Max and Wally ran back out with the rifles and the three men began sighting-in their scopes on the feeding birds.

"I can get two of 'em that are close together," Max said, pulling the rifle stock back firmly to his shoulder, trigger finger beginning to squeeze. Just as he fired, Lee slapped the rifle barrel up and the bullet went skyward, as did the ravens, frightened by the shot. Max turned red and swung the stock against Lee's jaw, dropping him to the ground.

"You don't *never* touch my rifle, mister!"

"Come on, let's go!" Labow ordered. The three men got into Labow's Jeep and sped off.

Lee rolled over groggily on the ground, his head throbbing madly, vision blurring in and out, heart pounding furiously in his chest. Struggling to a sitting position, he parted his knees and bent his head as far forward as possible to accelerate the blood flow to his brain. Presently his eyesight centralized again and his equilibrium began to return. Only slightly unsteady, he got into the Jeep he had unloaded and drove off after the three men.

When Lee came to the feed bin where the ravens had fed, he saw something beside it that caused him to brake to a sudden stop. Backing up, he looked down at one of his cages, its spring door fully open.

That son of a bitch Labow! he thought, incensed.

The foreman had said he was going down to a low meadow for help, but Lee had seen him driving back from a direction that Lee was sure was a high-meadow trail. It seemed obvious to Lee that Labow had gone up to where Lee had netted the ravens, brought down a cage containing three mature birds, and let them loose near the feed bin. The ravens, agitated and confused, would have gone at once to the familiar bin and begun eating to calm themselves. Labow had sabotaged Lee's work to have an excuse to slaughter the ravens.

Lee threw the Jeep into low gear, moving forward and upward again. He did not know whether he could catch up with Labow's vehicle or not, or even what he could do *if* he caught up with it—but he had to try *something*. Achieving the maximum speed possi-

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ble on the incline, he steered with one hand and with the other reached up to feel the left side of his face where he had been butt-stroked. It was already swelling badly, probably discoloring too. He was able to open his mouth, even though the pain was intense, so at least he knew his jaw was not broken.

When he got to the elevation of the high meadow, he found Labow's Jeep on the side of the road and the three men gone. Quickly parking, he jumped out and began trotting through the trees toward the meadow. When he was halfway there, he caught a glimpse of something off to his left. Stopping, he went into a crouch and scanned the area, thinking Labow and his men might have spread out for some reason, and the movement was possibly one of them. But he quickly saw it was not. It was not a man at all, but a horse off in the trees. A pinto mare. Domino. Charley's horse.

What the hell was Charley's horse doing up there?

Lee straightened and trotted faster. As he neared the edge of the meadow, he saw Labow and his two men standing out around the cages. And he heard Labow's voice.

"Shoot 'em in the cages. That way we'll get 'em all."

Max, the ranch hand who had struck Lee, shouldered his weapon again. He fired a single shot into the nearest cage, blowing the head off the largest raven. But as he aimed for a second kill, an eerie yell emitted from somewhere within the forest: *Eeeeee-yah!* And in its wake, a three-foot pine arrow, its foreshaft hollowed two inches deep and filled with wolf bone hardened by fire, soared silently through the air and embedded itself five inches into Max's back directly between the shoulder blades. Dropping his rifle, Max gaped incredulously into space, then fell facedown onto several of the cages, inside of which an already shrieking clamor of *quorks!* grew louder.

Labow and the other man, Wally, quickly recovered from their surprise, crouched, and began moving toward the direction from which the arrow had come, firing randomly into the woods as they moved. Lee also dropped into a crouch again, concealing himself behind a tree. Then another movement caught his eye: Out on the meadow, Grace's old pickup was speeding toward them. Labow and Wally, moving into a section of woods away from Lee, had not seen the pickup yet, so Lee bolted out of the trees and ran toward the gully where Grace would have to stop. His mind raced in a frenzy. Grace and Camas had come up to the meadow looking for Charley—

But when the truck got closer, he saw that only Grace was in it. Turning, Lee stared fearfully at the backs of the men with rifles who were moving aggressively into the woods. *Camas—!* Grace spun to a stop on the meadow grass and leaped out of the pickup. "My God, Lee, your face—!"

"Never mind that. Where's Camas?"

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"I don't know. I was at the market. When I got back, a neighbor told me he and Charley had left riding double on Domino. She said they had war paint on their faces."

"One of the Bovill ranch hands was just shot with an arrow," Lee told her. Grace's deep-socketed eyes widened in horror.

More rifle shots suddenly sounded from the woods. Lee and Grace rushed across the gully toward the gunfire. As they reached the tree line, there were two more cries of *Eeeeee-yah!* Then more rifle fire. Lee and Grace ran faster.

Presently, they burst upon a clearing that displayed a bloody scene. Wally lay dead with an arrow through his neck. Labow was leaning against a tree, rifle at his feet, an arrow deep in his right side just below the rib cage. Camas lay very still, an ugly purple hole in his forehead. Charley was on his side, gasping for breath, clutching a bullet wound in his chest. Grace ran to the boy while Lee checked Camas.

"He's dead," Lee said quietly when he joined Grace. She was sitting on her heels, face anguished, tears streaking down, cradling her brother's head in her lap.

"I—I'm—sorry—" Charley said, looking up at Grace. "Great-grandfather wanted—to die—like a war chief. He said—if I took some ravens—to the feed bin—that Bovill men would come—and he could fight for the spirit birds. So I did it—and came to fight with him—so he would not be alone. I'm—sorry—"

"Oh, baby, it's all right, it's okay," Grace promised tearfully. Charley looked at Lee.

"Camas told me—that he trusted you—to protect the spirit birds, Leeminton—but he didn't trust the government. He said—the government never protects anything—except itself." He turned his eyes back to Grace. "Guess—I won't pitch for the Indians—after all—"

The boy died in his sister's embrace. As he did, Lee and Grace heard Labow's voice across the clearing.

"Dirty—squaw—" he muttered hatefully.

He had picked up the rifle from where it lay at his feet, and now struggled to raise it with one hand. He managed to fire a single round at them. The bullet struck Grace in the left shoulder, knocking her upper body to the ground where she sat. Labow squeezed the trigger a second time, but there was only a click. The rifle was empty; Labow dropped it to the ground again.

Lee quickly knelt to Grace's aid. The bullet had broken her collarbone, deflected, and exited her body just behind the armpit. With Grace moaning in pain, Lee moved her away from her dead brother and used a handkerchief to make a compress for her to hold in place on the exit wound, while he tore part of his shirttail off to plug the small hole where the bullet had entered.

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"You'll be all right," he said quietly. "It went all the way through."

"Okay—okay—" she moaned.

"Is there a hospital down the mountain on your side?"

"A clinic—"

"All right. Lie still."

Lee rose and went over to Carl Labow.

"Did I—kill her?" Labow asked.

"No."

Labow locked eyes with Lee. "You going—to get me to a hospital?"

"No." Lee looked at the blood seeping out of Labow's shirt where the arrow protruded. It was almost black. "The arrow's in your liver," he said. "It'll take you about an hour to die. It'll be very painful. You'll probably scream a lot."

"You've got—to help me," Labow gasped. "I'm a white man—same as you—"

"No, you're not the same as me."

"You—can't—just leave me—"

"Watch me," Lee said coldly.

Returning to Grace, Lee helped her up and lifted her gently into his strong arms, and carried her back to the meadow. On the way, they saw Charley's horse, Domino.

"I'll call Charley's best friend," Grace said, still crying. "He can come get the horse. It can be his now."

When they got to the cages, Lee put Grace on the ground and quickly opened all the spring doors to release the birds. With a great furor of *quorks* and much desperate flapping of wings, the ravens all took flight and gathered in the sky, a free flock once again, flying.

Back in Lee's arms, Grace asked, "Will Bovill kill them now?"

"No," said Lee. "They'll move on to someplace else now. When one of the flock has been killed, they always move on. And they're smart: the smartest birds of all. Maybe this time they'll stay away from ranches."

At the pickup, Lee put Grace in the passenger seat and he got behind the wheel. Driving down the mountain toward the clinic, Grace rested her head back and continued to cry.

"Now you can go back to school," Lee said, trying to console her. "Now you can be a teacher, like Camas wanted you to be."

"I don't care about that anymore," Grace said, shaking her head miserably. "It isn't worth this. I won't go back to school. I won't be a teacher."

Lee took her left hand, pulling it to his lips, and kissed it briefly.

"Yes, you will," he said with quiet confidence. "You'll be a teacher. You'll be a very fine teacher. And your great-grandfather and Charley will look down and be proud."

Overhead, the spirit birds were flying northeast, toward the wilderness. O

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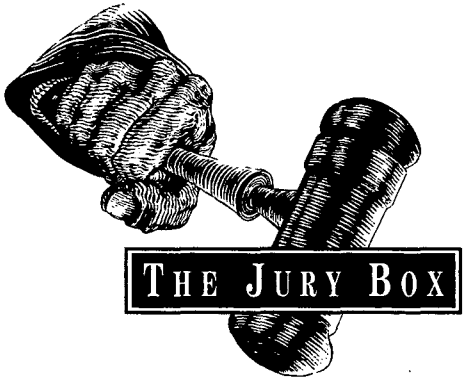

by Jon L. Breen

Most of the reading for this column was done among the seals, penguins, and icebergs on a millennial Antarctic cruise. I took along a group of paperback originals for the purpose, but by far the best book of the trip was found in the ship's library: a British hardcover of one of the highlights of 1999, Michael Connelly's *Angels Flight,* recently reprinted in paperback (Warner, $7.99). A civil rights lawyer specializing in suits against the police is found dead in a car of the titular funicular, one of several Los Angeles landmarks to figure in the story, and maverick cop Harry Bosch heads the investigation. This is a great L.A. mystery with a strong sense of the city's police and racial politics and a complex, surprising puzzle. Connelly strengthens his standing as one of the best active writers of crime fiction.

*** Jennifer Rowe: *Something Wicked,* Ballantine, $5.99. Australian cop Tessa Vance, whose internal conversations help to make her a fully rounded and believable character, and her partner-cum-romantic-interest Steve Hayden investigate the murder of faded rock star Adam Quinn in the odd mountain menage he maintained with a now-vanished wife and three very strange daughters. A neighboring house and the nearby village provide more suspects. Rowe's devotion to traditional detection, including cunning misdirection and fairly placed clues, is admirable.

*** Steven Womack: *Dirty Money,* Fawcett, $6.50. The series about Nashville private eye Harry James Denton has received much acclaim, including an Edgar award, and Womack's finely wrought first chapter, which could easily stand alone as a little-magazine short story, suggests why. Harry travels to Nevada for the birth of his daughter and winds up working undercover at the Mustang Ranch, now a federally-operated brothel, to foil a money-laundering scheme. The

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noted similarity to Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky is shown in the emphasis on the sleuth's personal life—in fact, this is almost male romantic suspense of a kind uncommon since the 1940s. The plot, unlike those of Grafton and Paretsky, is thin and perfunctory. The case referenced in the blurb isn't even hinted at until page 120 of 308, and the promised murder doesn't arrive until page 203. In a good novel that is a disappointing *mystery* novel, a painfully vivid description of childbirth from the father's viewpoint is one highlight.

*** Caroline Roe: *An Antidote for Avarice,* Berkley, $6.50. Isaac of Girona, Jewish physician to Berenguer de Cruilles, Bishop of Girona, is a blind detective in the tradition of Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados and Baynard Kendrick's Duncan Maclain. His third case effectively depicts a hazardous journey of the Bishop and his retinue from Girona to Tarragona in the Spain of 1354, with much mystery, skulduggery, and romantic complications along the way. This isn't likely to convert anyone to historical mystery fiction—there are too many characters and too much elaborate church politics and intrigue to sort through—but Roe, a pseudonym of well-known Canadian novelist Medora Sale, will satisfy fans of the genre. A map, character list, and historical note help.

*** Gini Hartzmark: *Dead Certain,* Fawcett, $6.50. In the latest novel about Chicago lawyer Kate Millholland, a pernicious HMO has designs on a charity hospital founded by one of her ancestors. As Kate's glamorous socialite mother leads the opposition to the takeover, the hospital is suffering from a series of patient anomalies that recall Robin Cook's *Coma* and subsequent hospital thrillers. Pluses: a nice style, good observations of the medical and legal professions—especially entertaining is a faulty analogy of the emergency room to a fast-food restaurant—and a cute main clue to the solution. Minuses: the common defect of too much back story and a least-suspected-person murderer who seems obvious from first appearance. (Naming a police detective after a prominent mystery editor is a cutesy touch that will mean nothing to most readers but may prove an irritating distraction to those in the field.)

** Orland Outland: *Death Wore the Emperor's New Clothes,* Berkley, $5.99. In its third outing, the series about cross-dressing gay sleuth Doan McCandler and his straight partner Binky van de Kamp shifts from a San Francisco to a New York locale. In an undistinguished mystery redeemed by some of the comedy and social observations, Outland satirizes contemporary media, fashion, economics, even sports with numerous recognizable equivalents to real-life celebrities. Main event is a duel between a liberal gay billionaire cross between Bill Gates and Warren

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Buffet and a media mogul with resemblances to Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner. I found most entertaining a self-help guru who assures his clients they can rationalize anything.

** Leslie O'Kane: *Ruff Way to Go,* Fawcett, $6.50. Allie Babcock, dog behavior therapist in a small Colorado town, agrees to judge a custody battle over a silky terrier named Shogun while unofficially looking into the murder of a neighbor who had provided a foster home for a felon's husky and her new litter of pups. The dog training stuff is interesting—indeed, like the amateur sleuth, the reader may prefer the dog characters to the human ones. The novel is quite readable, though the development is somewhat sitcomish and the author doesn't really provide the clued puzzle that, I continue to insist, this sort of book owes its reader.

In that same ship's library, I came across a couple of 1999 volumes from The Gunsmith series that Robert J. Randisi writes under the name J.R. Roberts and was startled to discover they were numbers 209 and 211. Apart from turning out westerns at an almost Creasey-like volume, along with crime fiction under his own name, and founding Private Eye Writers of America, Randisi has edited some of the best anthologies of recent years. The latest is *First Cases, Volume 3* (Signet, $6.50). Leading off is the undervalued Talmage Powell's 1949 *Black Mask* story "Her Dagger Before Me," a strong and very Hammett-like tale that ostensibly introduces Powell's Florida private eye Ed Rivers under the name Lloyd Carter. The only other sleuth represented by her actual first appearance at any length is Maxine O'Callaghan's Delilah West in the 1974 landmark "A Change of Clients," though Anne Perry's Lady Vespasia Cumming-Gould, a secondary character in the Charlotte and Thomas Pitt series, makes her solo debut in the 1998 story, "An Affair of Inconvenience." Two good originals, Stuart Kaminsky's "Snow" and Laura Lippman's "Orphans Court," mark the first briefer cases for Porfiry Rostnikov and Tess Monaghan respectively. Sleuths represented in reprints include some top private eyes rarely seen in the short form, including John Lutz's Fred Carver, Jerry Kennealy's Nick Polo, Les Roberts's Saxon, and Gar Anthony Haywood's Aaron Gunner.

Finally, a token hardcover. Max Allan Collins's first series character was the professional thief Nolan, introduced in the 1973 paperback *Bait Money.* An earlier unpublished Nolan novel was serialized in the '80s in *Hardboiled.* In its first book edition, *Mourn the Living* (Five Star, P.O. Box 159, Thorndike, ME 04986; $20.95), little revised from what Collins wrote as a 19-year-old, may lack the polish of his later work, but it's a lively piece of youthful storytelling that will please his fans.

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The Silence
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

Pigeons
BY JOSEPH MONNINGER

The End of the Pier
BY ALISON WHITE

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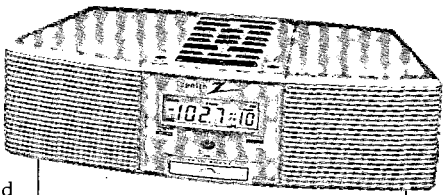

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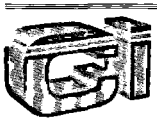

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